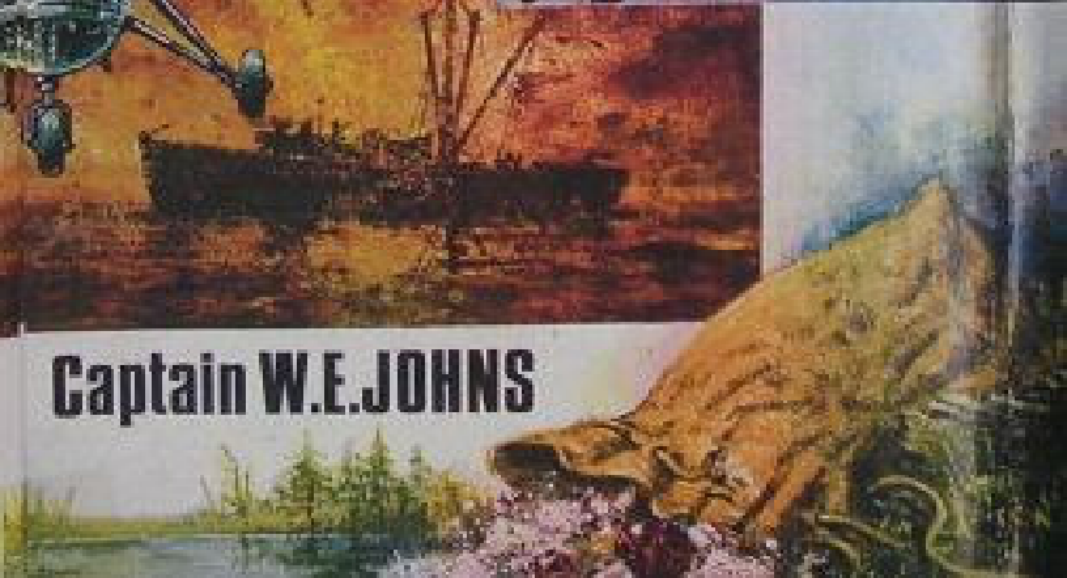


BIGGLES

AND THE
PENITENT
THIEF



Captain W.E. JOHNS



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CHAPTER 1

A CASE OF BAD LUCK

THERE was silence in the London flat Biggles shared with his friends; his pilots of the Air Police. It had persisted for some time. Bertie and Ginger were engaged in what seemed an interminable game of chess. Algy was engrossed in a book. Biggles half sat, half reclined, in an armchair with an ashtray overflowing with cigarette ends at his elbow. The hands of the clock on the mantelpiece pointed to ten o'clock.

As it struck the hour he yawned, and stirred. 'Well, I don't know about you chaps, but I'm going to put in some blanket drill,' he announced. 'Anyone who makes a noise when he goes to bed will incur my displeasure.' He stood up.

'Check,' murmured Ginger, moving a piece on the chessboard.

The word might have been a signal, for on the instant there came a tap on the door.

'Come in,' called Biggles.

It was the doorkeeper from the hall below. 'There's a man downstairs asking to see you,' he said, looking at Biggles.

'It's a bit late. Did he give any reason?'

'No. But he said it was important.'

'What's his name?'

'He didn't give it; but he said you'd know him when you saw him.'

Biggles sighed. 'I suppose I'd better see what he wants. Bring him up.'

A minute later the caller was shown in. He was a short, sturdy little man, who looked a little on the wrong side of forty. He had a mop of untidy fair hair and the eyes that came to rest on Biggles' face were conspicuously blue. He wore a dark serge suit that had seen better days, although it was evident he had smartened himself up for the occasion. His collar was clean and fastened with an R.A.F. tie.

'Am I supposed to know you?' questioned Biggles, frowning.

'Don't say you've forgotten me, sir,' returned the man with a hint of reproach in his voice. 'I served in your squadron in the good old days. Miller's the name, sir. 431 Corporal Miller, fitter-armourer. The boys called me Dusty.'

Recognition dawned in Biggles' eyes. 'Of course. But it's been a long time and you've put on a bit of weight since I last saw you.'

'Like most of us, sir. Bound to, I suppose.' Miller's voice had a cheerful cockney ring.

'What's the trouble?'

'You've hit the nail right on the head, as usual, sir. Trouble's the word.'

'Well, sit down. What can I do for you? Make it short because I'm just off

to bed. What's this trouble? Money?'

'Nothing like that, sir. If that was all I wouldn't worry. But I know what your job is now; I've seen your name in the papers. I thought you might be able to help me; give me your advice. Same time I might be able to tell you something.'

'Well, get on with it. I'll do the best I can,' promised Biggles, a trifle impatiently.

'I suppose the name Miller doesn't mean anything to you—I mean as a copper — sorry, sir, policeman?'

'There are thousands of Millers in London. Come to the point. This is no time for quiz games.'

'Quite right, sir. But p'raps this'll ring a bell. A bit over a year ago there was a big jewel robbery at a shop in Regent Street, place called Marchant's. According to the papers the crooks got away with stuff reckoned to be worth a quarter of a million. They were never caught and the loot was never recovered.'

'What about it? Don't say you were one of the crooks!'

'Not me, sir. I've always gone straight.'

'Well?'

'I know where the stuff is hid.'

Biggles' eyes narrowed with suspicion. 'If you had no hand in it how does that happen?'

'My son was one of the gang. I've persuaded him to talk, if—'

'If what?' broke in Biggles sharply. 'The police don't bargain with crooks.'

'Suppose you let me tell you the whole story, sir, right from the start. Then you'll be able to judge for yourself. If my boy Tommy is a crook it was the police what made him one.' A hard note had crept into Miller's voice.

'Go ahead, but keep it brief,' Biggles said, glancing at the clock and reaching for a cigarette. 'But before you begin, remember I'm a police officer, so it's only fair to warn you that anything you say may be used as evidence. There are witnesses to this conversation.'

Algy had put down his book and was listening, as were Bertie and Ginger, no longer interested in their game.

'My son Tommy was the victim of the worst miscarriage of justice—'

'I've heard that before,' Biggles said with a hint of sarcasm. 'Get on with the story.'

'Yes, sir.' Miller cleared his throat. 'As soon as the war was over I got married. I'd got a good job with Vickers Aviation and everything was fine. We had a son, me and the missus. We brought him up well. He was a good lad. Did well at school, and we had hopes he'd do better than his father, although I haven't done so bad. In our spare time I taught him all I knew and he was soon better with tools for fine adjustments, mikes and Vernier slide rules and so on, than I shall ever be. When he left school, with his exams passed, he had no difficulty in getting a job with Cluft's, the people in North

London who specialize in locks and keys for safes.'

'And as a safe maker I suppose he could also break 'em,' put in Biggles dryly.

'Naturally, if he'd wanted to. But he didn't want to. He'd no reason to. He was doing well. He lived with us where we had a house in Weybridge and we were proud of him. Apple of my wife's eye, as you might say. Then, out of the blue the axe came down and ruined all our lives.'

'What sort of axe?' inquired Biggles.

'Like I say, Tommy was living with us, so to get to his job in London he had to go up and down by train — commuters, they call such people nowadays. One evening, it was during the bus strike, on a pouring wet night he was walking home from the station, a fair distance, when seeing a car coining along he thumbed a lift. The car stopped. He got in. He told the driver where he lived and the car went on. The driver seemed a pleasant sort of chap so they chatted, like people do, Tommy saying where he worked, and so on. We can see now that was the real tragedy, but how was he to know...' For a moment the speaker looked as if he was going to break down.

'Take your time,' Biggles said gently. 'Here, have a cigarette. Ginger, give him a glass of sherry.'

'Thank you, sir,' acknowledged Miller, as he accepted the drink. 'Now, where did I get to? Oh yes. Tommy was in the car. Presently they ran into a traffic snarl-up. That's what it looked like. The driver got out to see what was causing the hold-up. He had a look and walked away. He didn't come back. Next thing was Tommy had to move the car to let somebody else go through. By the time he'd done that there was a policeman standing by each door. It was a police road block. Tommy was hauled out. It was a stolen car. Tommy looked for the man who'd been driving, but he wasn't in sight. No doubt he'd spotted what was going on and had hoofed it. Tommy tried to explain what had happened, but it was no use. He was taken to the police-station and charged with taking a car without the owner's consent. He hadn't a hope. To make a long story short, it ended with him getting three months in gaol. He couldn't prove his story. Only his finger-prints were on the steering-wheel. He remembered the driver, the car thief, had been wearing gloves. The evidence was all against him and the police made the most of it. Tommy had only his bare word for what had happened. Nobody believed him.'

Biggles shrugged, looking sympathetic. 'I suppose that sort of thing can happen,' he had to concede.

'The time my boy served in prison did something to him,' went on Miller grimly. 'He was never the same afterwards. He went in as nice a lad as you could wish to meet; he came out embittered, his nature warped and twisted, hating everyone, particularly the police. It didn't do me any good, either, my mates at the works knowing my boy was in quod. Of course he'd lost his job. Well, that's the state he was in when he ran into the real culprit, the man who'd pinched the car. The meeting looked like an accident, but in view of

what happened afterwards I've got my own ideas about that. This feller knew where Tommy lived and waylaid him; I'm certain of that. Tommy was ready to knock hell out of him, but the chap, one of the glib-tongued type, calmed him down, saying he'd make things right with him. They ended up with the man taking him to a pub for a drink. He explained he hadn't been able to help him because he was on the run for another job.'

Tommy didn't think of going to the police?' put in Biggles.

'He'd no longer any time for the police.'

'Pity. That's where he was wrong.'

'He can see that now, but it's easy to see mistakes afterwards. Well, maybe you can guess what happened. It may not have been hard for Darris — that's the name of the man who started all the trouble, Lew Darris — to persuade Tommy to go with him to see his boss, a sort of big-shot crook. You can see why. Tommy, being an expert on safes, would be useful. Of course, I knew nothing about this at the time, nor for a long time afterwards. But since he came home Tommy's told me all about it.'

'So he went away?'

'Yes.'

'Joined this master-crook?'

'Yes.'

'The gang that did the Marchant job?'

'That's right.'

'Did your son tell you anything about the man who organized it?'

'Told me as much as he knows about him, which ain't much, although he got to know him well — too well, as you'll hear presently.'

'What's his name?'

'Raulstein. Otto Raulstein.'

'What nationality?'

'According to Raulstein, his father was an Armenian and his mother Turkish. I dunno what that makes him but he came here years ago and managed to get himself naturalized British. A nasty piece of work if ever there was one. Must have been a crook all his life but got away with it by getting others to do his dirty work. Kept a big place at Wimbledon when Tommy first knew him.'

'What made your son join such a man?'

'Like I say, he was ripe to get his own back for what had happened; but as he said to me, his big mistake was to take money from Raulstein. Of course he was broke at the time. I wondered where he was getting his money. He said he'd been lucky at dog racing. That's how things were when one day he went out and didn't come back. That was more than a year ago. I didn't see him again till the other day when he walked in looking like death warmed up. Now he's told me everything, such a tale as you'd find hard to believe.'

'But you believe it?'

'Every word. He couldn't have dreamed up such a story.'

‘Did he suggest you went to the police?’

‘No. I told him I was going to see you and ask your advice. I don’t think he cares what happens now. He’s sunk too low. Seems all broke up.’

‘What did you hope to gain by coming to me?’

‘I thought p’raps if Tommy told you where the Marchant swag was hid you’d leave him alone.’

‘So he knows where it is?’

‘He thinks so. But it ain’t here. It’s the other side of the world.’

Biggles’ eyebrows went up. ‘How did they manage that?’

‘I’ll tell you,’ Miller said. ‘Listen to this.’

‘I’m listening,’ returned Biggles patiently, for by this time he was more than a little interested in the strange story the ex-airman was telling. He had already decided there was a ring of truth in it.

‘Like I say, Tommy saw Raulstein at his house,’ resumed Miller. ‘It turned out Tommy was the sort of man he’d been looking for to pull a big job he’d had in mind for some time. This was to break into the jewellers, Marchant’s, in Regent Street, one weekend when there would be nobody there. Tommy wasn’t prepared for anything like that. I’m giving you the story as he told it to me. He jibbed. Whereupon Raulstein turned nasty. The trouble was, Tommy had already been taking his money, through Lew Darris. Raulstein asked in no uncertain manner why he thought he’d been sending him money.’

‘Tommy must have realized he wasn’t being given money for nothing,’ interposed Biggles, critically.

‘He thought Darris was trying to make up for the scurvy trick he’d played on him over the stolen car business. Raulstein had another argument. He carried a gun. He showed it, threatening to use it on Tommy if he let him down. Finding that didn’t work, he tried the velvet glove method. One big job and that would be the lot, he promised. They’d all be rich for life. There wasn’t any risk. It was kids’ stuff. He’d got everything laid on for a clean getaway, which turned out to be true enough. They’d all be out of the country before the robbery was discovered. Well, let’s face it. Tommy fell for it. Remember, apart from anything else, he was flat broke, living on me, and no hope of getting a job. He’d no reason to stay here. He’d make a fresh start in another country. So after a bit he said okay. Whereupon Raulstein showed his full hand. He’d got an 800-ton diesel-engined yacht at moorings down at Ichenor, fully provisioned for a long voyage with an engineer in charge. A car would get them to it once the swag was in the bag. It was all too easy.’

‘That’s when Tommy should have gone to the police,’ remarked Biggles, shaking his head sadly.

‘He realizes that now, but he admits that at the time it was the last thing in his mind. He’d still got a chip on his shoulder about the police. Anyway, the job was done, as you know. There were three of ‘em in it. Lew Darris, the engineer from the yacht, who turned out to be an old lag named Grant wanted by the police, and Tommy. He would deal with the safes once they were

inside. The others would do the breaking in.'

'What about Raulstein?' interrupted Biggles.

'He waited with the car in a nearby car park. Well, I needn't go into details. The job went without a hitch and the car was soon on its way to the coast. Two hours later the yacht, named *Lapwing*, was at sea with the swag on board, heading down the Channel. It looked all over bar the shouting, but, as you'll hear, it wasn't, not by a long chalk. The troubles were about to begin.'

Miller broke off to sip his drink.

CHAPTER 2

A TALE OF INFAMY

‘WHERE were they making for?’ inquired Biggles.

‘America, where Raulstein reckoned there’d be no difficulty in selling the jewellery. But there was one thing, for all his planning, he hadn’t taken into account. None of ‘em really knew how to handle the ship. Raulstein was the only one who knew anything about it; but it’s one thing to mess about in sight of land, but another matter altogether to take a small craft across the Atlantic. Three days out, keeping clear of the regular shipping lanes, they ran into heavy weather. Tommy was as sick as a dog and for a while he couldn’t have cared less about what happened to them. Darris was in much the same state. Later they ran into a real snorter which lasted for three days, and it took them all their time to keep afloat. Then it fell dead calm and they found themselves in thick fog. A few days of this and Raulstein had to admit he didn’t know where they were. As events were to show, they must already have been miles off course.’

‘Where were they making for, exactly?’

The United States. Nowhere in particular. Anywhere would do, according to Raulstein. He couldn’t have known much about navigation.’

‘He must have been out of his mind,’ put in Bertie.

‘Well,’ continued the ex-airman, ‘by this time they were all exhausted and hardly on speaking terms. You can imagine the mess they were in. Food was running low. So was water. The weather turned cold. Tommy, who was pretty good at geography, said they were getting too far north. Not that they could do anything about it because the engine chose this moment to pack up. What was worse, the engineer, Grant, said he couldn’t do anything about it. There wasn’t much fuel left, anyway. So, with one thing and another, they were properly up the creek without a paddle, as you might say. All they could do was drift about hoping to see land—any land would do. Tommy says he was wishing he’d stayed at home.’

‘I’ll bet he was,’ breathed Ginger.

‘They’d been at sea for six weeks and were rocking about in a choppy sea when Tommy saw the sort of man Raulstein really was,’ Miller continued.

‘I’d have thought he’d have known that already,’ observed Biggles cynically.

‘He didn’t realize he was a murderer.’

‘So that’s what it came to?’

‘Yes. It was like this. In a nasty sea, with no land in sight, they were keeping the ship going with a bit of sail. Tommy came up from below just in time to see Raulstein push Grant overboard. There was no argument about it. It was deliberate. Tommy could hardly believe his eyes. Darris was at the

wheel. He ran to him and told him to go about as Grant had gone overboard. Darris, who must have seen what happened, was staring straight ahead. He simply said, "Forget it." Tommy stared at him, thinking he couldn't have heard aright. Then he got it. Raulstein and Darris had fixed this up between them. Darris's next words practically proved it. He said: "He was no damn use to us. Just so much dunnage. Without him the grub'll last longer. Besides, he'll be one less to share when we carve up the swag. Take my advice and keep your trap shut." Tommy said no more. There was nothing he could do. Seeing the sort of company he was in, he realized he was likely to be the next to go overboard. He thinks the reason they didn't knock him off there and then was because he was the only one who knew anything about cooking— what little cooking there was to do. He kept his mouth shut and his eyes open; and he took care to keep well clear of the rail.'

'What a tale,' murmured Biggles. 'Talk about honour among thieves.'

'I haven't finished yet. There's more to come,' declared Miller. 'If you've found the story hard to believe so far, wait till you've heard the rest. The next night, in pitch-dark, the yacht ran aground and stove a hole in her bottom on what turned out to be a rocky island.'

'Ah. Now we're getting somewhere,' Biggles said. 'What was the name of the island?'

'Marten Island.'

'Never heard of it. Where is it?'

'It lies about two miles off the coast of Labrador.'

Biggles stared. 'Labrador! Canada! Great grief! How could they have got so far off course?'

'I reckon they'd been off course from the start. Anyway, there they were. At first light, with the yacht breaking up on the rocks, they managed to get ashore in the dinghy. They even made a mess of that in their hurry and had to wade the last bit with the dinghy being knocked to splinters in the surf. Raulstein carried the jewellery in a canvas bag. That was all they saved. They hadn't a clue where they were, but they could see a house, a sort of glorified log cabin, not far away, so they took it for granted that the place was inhabited. They didn't realize yet they were on an island. They walked along to the house. It was the only one as far as they could see. They banged on the door. No one answered. They went in. There was nobody there. But what did they find? Talk about luck! Everything set out as if a shipload of castaways was expected.'

'Their story gets more fascinating every minute,' murmured Biggles. 'Go on.'

The place was furnished. Plain but comfortable. There were cupboards full of stores, biscuits and canned stuff of every description. There were even some bottles of beer. Everything was clean and tidy as if someone had been living there.'

'Of course, they were dreaming,' put in Bertie.

‘Not a bit of it. The stuff was really there. There was a stove. They lit it and sitting at the table had the first square meal they’d had for weeks.’

‘Then they woke up,’ guessed Bertie, smiling.

Miller ignored the interruption. ‘When they’d finished they went out to have a look round. It was then they discovered they were on an island. Not a very big ‘un. Tommy reckons it was about three miles long and a quarter of a mile across at the widest part. It was mostly rock. What wasn’t rock was trees. Fir trees and bushes. It was hilly round the outside, but the middle was flat. They saw they had it all to themselves. Not far away they could see what they took to be the mainland; but without a boat they’d no way of getting to it, even if they’d wanted to. But with plenty of grub they’d nothing to worry about. They could see some small craft scattered about in the distance, which they took to be fishing boats. Tommy was for lighting a big smoke signal fire, but Raulstein said they weren’t in any hurry. They went back to the house. Apart from birds, the only living things on the island seemed to be foxes and there were plenty of those — the sort that have dark hair with grey tips. Raulstein said they were silver foxes.’ Miller grinned bleakly. ‘Sounds like a fairy-tale, don’t it?’

‘Carry on,’ requested Biggles. ‘I can’t wait to hear the rest of it.’

‘They had another meal. When it got dark they went to bed. There was only one bed. Raulstein had it. The others slept on the floor. Came daylight the trouble started that was to end in another murder. After breakfast Tommy went outside. Lew Darris joined him. “Notice anything?” he whispers. “Notice what?” says Tommy. “The swag has disappeared,” says Lew. “That skunk Raulstein’s hid it. Mark my words, he intends to have the lot. No sharing it with us. Not him. When it suits him he’ll knock us off. Who’s to know? When he’s rescued, as he’s bound to be sooner or later, he’ll say he was alone on the island. It’s as plain as a pikestaff. You saw the way he got rid of Grant. If he could do a thing like that, why shouldn’t he treat us the same way? Eh? Tell me that?”

‘Tommy could see Lew’s argument made sense,’ continued ex-corporal Miller. ‘There wasn’t any reason why Raulstein should share the loot with ‘em. That didn’t worry Tommy, but naturally he didn’t want to be murdered. “What can we do about it?” he says. “I’ll tell you,” says Lew. “He ain’t as smart as he thinks he is. I heard him get up in the night, and guessing what he was up to I kept an eye on him. I saw where he hid the bag.” “Where?” says Tommy. “You see that bit of a knoll on the edge of the cliff over there,” says Lew. “That’s where he put it, under a heap o’ rocks. He didn’t see me watching him.”

‘By this time all Tommy was thinking of was how to stay alive,’ explained Miller. ‘He says to Lew, “What do you suggest we do? Don’t forget Raulstein has a gun in his pocket.” “There’s only one thing we can do,” declares Lew. “Get him before he can get us. Knock his brains out when he’s got his back turned. That leaves only the two of us to share the stuff.”

‘Of course, not being a fool Tommy realizes there’d soon only be one of ‘em, and it wouldn’t be him,’ went on Miller. ‘He’s sick of all this talk about murder, but he pretends to agree. But he’s got a different idea. It was this. If he could move the swag secretly to some place where only he knew where it was, neither Lew nor Raulstein would dare to kill him for fear of never being able to find it. He tells Lew to go back to the house, saying he’ll follow him presently. Instead, as soon as Lew’s out of sight, he slips across to the knoll and finds the swag under some rocks like Lew has said. Picking up the bag he runs to the nearest trees and shoves it down a foxhole, afterwards kicking some loose earth over it. Then he strolls back to the house.’ Miller paused to accept another cigarette.

‘Lew and Raulstein are there, talking,’ he continued. ‘Lew winks at Tommy as much as to say, now’s the time. He picks up the iron poker as if to poke the fire. As he does so something falls through a hole in his pocket and rattles on the floor. Tommy sees what it is. So does Raulstein. It’s a gold ring with a whacking great diamond sparkling in it. Raulstein stares at it. Then he glares at Lew. “You damn thief,” he snarls. “So that’s it. You’ve been at the swag behind my back.” Lew starts to explain, but Raulstein cuts him off. “This is how I deal with crooks,” he shouts and whipping out his gun shoots Lew dead on the spot.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘What a bunch of crooks,’ he muttered. ‘Tommy certainly hooked up with a right lot of villains.’

‘Tommy thinks, this is where I get it, too,’ resumed Miller. ‘But no. After a bit Raulstein calms down and puts the gun back in his pocket. “Let this be a lesson to you,” he growls. “This is what you’ll get if you ever try to double-cross me. Here, give me a hand to get rid of this!” He takes hold of Lew by one of his legs. Tommy takes the other leg, at the same time picking up the ring and putting it in his pocket for the time being. Raulstein doesn’t seem to notice. Between them they drag Lew’s body to the edge of the cliff and dump it over into the sea. What else could Tommy do? If he’d raised any objection he’d have been asking for it. As it was he was in a sweat about what Raulstein would do when he discovered the swag had disappeared. He thought that wouldn’t be long, and he was right. “Let’s see what else the rat pinched,” says Raulstein, starting to walk towards the knoll, explaining he’d put the swag out of the house for fear someone came along and saw it. Tommy thinks here comes the show-down.’

‘Wasn’t it?’ inquired Ginger, who had followed the infamous story of treachery wide-eyed.

‘No, although it should have been,’ Miller answered. ‘This is what happened. When they get to the place where Raulstein had put the bag, and he found it wasn’t there, he raved like a madman, cursing Lew to hell and back. It didn’t seem to strike him that Tommy had anything to do with it. “I wonder where he could have put it,” he says. “How would I know?” says Tommy, doing his best to look innocent. “You were out with him this morning,” says

Raulstein suspiciously. "Let's look for it," says Tommy. "He couldn't have gone far. It shouldn't take us long to find it." Actually he was playing for time, because he'd spotted something Raulstein hadn't seen, having his back to the sea. It was a motor-boat coming fast from the mainland towards the island. "Better not do anything in a hurry," he says to Raulstein. "There's somebody coming. If we found the bag where'd we put it? This chap who's coming is bound to offer to pick us up. If he saw us with a bag he'd wonder what we'd got in it."

"That's right," says Raulstein. "This needs thinking about." Tommy says, "Let's see how he shapes when he finds us here helping ourselves to his property." Raulstein says he has a better idea. It was to shoot the man as soon as he landed and pinch his boat. Tommy thought he was past being shocked, but this casual, cold-blooded talk of murder, took his breath away. He decided, whatever happened, he wouldn't stand for that. "You must be off your rocker," he says, bluntly. "The boat must be well known, and the man who owns it. They'd be missed, and word would go out up and down the coast."

"I reckon you're right," agrees Raulstein. He agrees to Tommy's suggestion that they go to the house and wait, to explain how they got there and see how things worked out. So they walk back to the house and wait for the man to arrive. Sometime later he walks in. Of course he's surprised to see 'em, but far from making any trouble about them helping themselves to his property, he tells 'em to think nothing of it. They did the sensible thing. Raulstein puts on his best suave manner and gives his version of how he and Tommy had been cast ashore and lost their yacht in a gale. The man, a tall, red-headed, good-looking chap who says his name is Angus Campbell, explains what he's doing there. It turns out he's a silver fox farmer. He has the island on lease from the Canadian government. He doesn't keep his foxes in cages, but lets them run loose to breed. Every so often he collects some of the young 'uns and sells them to other breeders for stock. He lives on the mainland, but once in a while he comes across to see if everything's all right and put down a load of food, mostly meat, for the foxes. That's what he was doing now. He built the cabin and laid in some stores because the weather was tricky and there was always a risk of him being stuck on the island for as long as a storm lasted, p'raps days, or even weeks. He said he was going back right away because the weather people had forecast a period of gales. He'd take them to the mainland with him.'

'Which put Raulstein and Tommy on a bit of a spot, as you might say,' put in Biggles.

'Too true,' agreed Miller. 'What could they do? They couldn't ask the man to wait because he was obviously in a hurry to get back home while the going was good. He'd done what he came to do, that is, dumped the food for the foxes. It was now plain why there were so many foxes on the island. Campbell had put them there in the first place.'

‘What did they do?’ inquired Ginger.

‘Well, Raulstein did suggest they might stay on the island for a little while, but Campbell said with the winter coming on it might be months before he came back. Nobody else was likely to call. Well, neither Raulstein nor Tommy wanted to spend the winter on the island, so in the end they had to go off with Campbell.’

‘Leaving the swag to be collected at some future date?’

‘That was the idea. Raulstein of course had no suspicion that Tommy knew where the stuff was; and Tommy wasn’t saying anything. So they go to the mainland, where Campbell puts them up in his house in a little fishing village. Tommy’s one thought now was to get away from Raulstein. In the morning, without saying anything to him, he slipped off and managed to get a lift to the nearest town, the name of which he’s forgotten. From there he got to Newfoundland.’

‘What did he use for money?’ asked Biggles.

‘He had a pound or two in his pocket to start with. He also had the ring which Darris had dropped. He pawned it for two hundred pounds. He had to, to pay his fare home from St John’s, where, as you know, the trans-Atlantic planes touch down. He’s still got the pawn ticket, so the ring could be redeemed at any time. That’s how he got home.’

‘What about Raulstein?’

‘Tommy doesn’t know what became of him. He never saw him again after leaving Campbell’s house in Labrador. Well, that’s the tale of woe Tommy told to me. He made a clean confession of the whole affair.’ Miller looked at Biggles anxiously. ‘Do you believe the story, sir?’

‘Why? Did you think I wouldn’t?’

‘I thought you’d find it a bit hard to swallow, sir.’

Biggles stubbed his cigarette in the ashtray. ‘I believe every word of it,’ he said slowly. ‘And I’ll tell you why. No man in his right mind would think up such a fantastic tale and expect to be believed. In fact, it would need a vivid imagination to think out such a yarn. A liar, trying to put over a string of lies, would invent something simple, less complicated, more plausible. That’s why I believe it.’

‘And what will you do about it, sir?’

‘There’s only one thing I can do about it, and that’s to put the whole thing in front of my chief and leave any decision to him. Where is Tommy now?’

‘At home, staying with me.’

‘Then he’d better remain there. Give me your address.’ Biggles jotted it down on a scribbling pad. Then he looked at the clock. It was nearly two o’clock. ‘Great snakes! Look at the time!’ he exclaimed. ‘This spellbinding tale of yours has cost me my beauty-sleep. How are you going to get home?’

‘That’s all right, sir. I’ve got a car. I left it in an all-night garage not far away.’

‘Good. Then you’d better get along.’ Biggles stood up. ‘I’ll talk things over

with my Chief and as soon as he's decided on what action to take I'll get in touch with you.'

'What do you think they'll do to Tommy?' asked Miller, apprehensively.

Biggles shook his head. 'I don't know. As far as the law is concerned the fact that he took part in the raid on Marchant's makes him a criminal. But you must have realized that when you decided to come here.'

'That's true enough, sir. But as he's the only man alive today who knows where the jewels are, I thought—'

'They'd let him off in return for handing them over? Is that it?'

'Something like that, sir,' admitted Miller. 'That's what I hoped. It's the argument I used with Tommy to get him to talk. Don't forget it was the police who put him off the rails in the first place.'

'Well, I can't make any promises on that score,' Biggles replied. 'As I said at the beginning, we don't make bargains with crooks, although, if they turn Queen's Evidence it can make a difference. On his own admission Tommy has associated with a murderer.'

'But he wasn't to know that, and there was nothing he could do about it. Without Tommy's help you'll never catch Raulstein because no one else could identify him. And he's prepared to testify against him.'

'Well, we'll see about it,' concluded Biggles. 'Now you'd better get along home. I'll see you to the door.'

CHAPTER 3

BIGGLES HAS A PROBLEM

BIGGLES lost not only his beauty-sleep but a good deal more, for he went to bed with a problem on his mind, and that is never conducive to easy slumber. He wished fervently that Corporal 'Dusty' Miller had not brought his troubles to him. He had warned him at the outset that anything he said might be used in evidence and therein lay the crux of the matter. If he reported to Headquarters what he now knew about the Marchant jewel robbery, it seemed likely that Dusty would have defeated his object, in that both father and son would find themselves in court, the son as a criminal and the father for harbouring a man he knew to be one. On the other hand, if he, Biggles, withheld the information now in his possession, then he would be failing in his duty.

Whether to keep silent or divulge the facts of the case was the question that worried him for most of the night, although in his heart he knew there was only one course open to him. He would have to speak, and Tommy Miller would almost certainly have to take the consequences for his part in the raid on the Regent Street jeweller's shop. What punishment he would receive would be for the judge to decide, and nothing Biggles could do would alter that.

Should that happen, the Corporal would of course think that he, Biggles, had let him down. Betrayed his confidence. That was only human nature. It was that which really distressed him. He liked the man who had once served under him. He had been an efficient, conscientious mechanic, and what had happened was through no fault of his. Tommy was his son, so it was only natural that he should protect him by every means in his power. Being a law-abiding man he, too, had been faced by a problem; forced to make a difficult decision; and it must have been in desperation that he had come to the only man he knew who might be able to help him. Wherefore Biggles recoiled from the idea of hurting him, but did not see how it could be otherwise.

Tommy was a different matter. He did not know him. He had never seen him. He had only his father's word for his moral character, at all events up to the time of the stolen car tragedy; and parents, naturally, are inclined to be prejudiced in their judgment in favour of their children.

It was easy to find sympathy for Tommy. The whole trouble — if his father was to be believed and this was not to be doubted — stemmed from his wrongful imprisonment. That would sour any young man. If he had been guilty of anything it was folly; folly in not going to the police as soon as he knew what the villainous Raulstein intended. Even making allowances for his state of mind when the proposition was put to him, what he did to make himself an outlaw was stupid, muddle-headed. No doubt he realized it now.

But now it was too late. He had taken the fatal step, and what had been done could not be undone.

Indeed, had he been wise, or not blinded by resentment and animosity, he should have gone to the police the moment Lew Darris had made contact with him. That was his chance to clear himself. He should have had the wit to realize that association with such a man could only lead to more trouble; that a professional crook is actuated solely by self-interest. Had Tommy taken the sensible course, he would have received a free pardon with possibly some financial compensation into the bargain. He would have been in a position to prove what he had been unable to prove at the time of the stolen car incident. But he had not done that, so it was no use thinking about it.

For the murder of Grant on the yacht, and the killing of Lew Darris on the island, Tommy was not to be blamed. It was easy to believe he had been shocked. He could not have imagined such dastardly behaviour. No man in his right mind would undertake a long sea voyage with a party of men who were not only crooks but potential murderers. Grant and Darris had got what they deserved, so Biggles made no pretence of shedding tears on their account. All the same, nothing can excuse murder.

One thing, Biggles pondered, stood in Tommy's favour; to his advantage. He had made no attempt, as might have been expected of a natural rogue, to recover the jewels for his own use, although possession of them would have made him a rich man. He had, moreover, taken steps to see that Raulstein did not get them either. True, he had pawned the ring out of necessity, but if, as he claimed, he still had the pawn ticket, it could be redeemed at any time. Only Tommy knew where the jewels were hidden, although doubtless Raulstein would do his utmost to find them; either that, or find Tommy if he came to the conclusion that he must know where they were. That might put Tommy in some danger.

It was the knowledge that Tommy knew the exact whereabouts of the jewels that had brought his father to see him, decided Biggles. He hoped to strike a bargain; his son's freedom against a quarter of a million pounds' worth of gold and precious stones. He had as good as said so. Biggles, of course, could not accept such a proposition, and he doubted very much if the Higher Authority would consider it seriously, although in view of the exceptional circumstances — Tommy's wrongful imprisonment, for instance — they might give it some thought. If the police authorities made a practice of such arrangements, quite a few crooks would be able to buy their freedom when they found themselves under lock and key. Biggles thought the best Tommy could hope for would be a reduced sentence in return for telling all he knew.

What he expected would happen when he repeated the story to his Chief was that Tommy would be arrested, at any rate for questioning, and perhaps his father with him. He could perceive a certain weakness in the case for a prosecution should Tommy be arrested. Suppose, taking umbrage, he should

deny the whole thing? Say there wasn't a word of truth in it? The tale he had told his father was a pack of lies to account for his long absence from home? What could the police do then? There was no evidence, circumstantial or otherwise. The case would rest on Tommy's alleged confession, which he could now deny.

Biggles knew there was only one course of action open to him, and he got dressed with the intention of seeking an interview with Air Commodore Raymond as soon as possible in order to disclose the information now in his possession.

He had just finished his breakfast when Bertie, still in his pyjamas, came into the living-room.

'I heard you on the move, old boy, so I've tottered in to see if you've made up your mind about what you're going to do over Dusty Miller, and all that, if you see what I mean?' he announced cheerfully, pouring himself a cup of tea.

'I'm going to hand the whole unsavoury kettle of fish to the Air Commodore and leave him to sort it out,' answered Biggles. 'What else can I do? We can do nothing on our own account.'

'Isn't that going to be a smack in the eye for Dusty?'

'Bound to be. Pity, but there it is. Dusty must have known what would happen. I gave him fair warning. He might have been better advised to keep his mouth shut.'

'I suppose we couldn't keep *our* mouths shut,' offered Bertie tentatively.

'Definitely not,' declared Biggles. 'That would make us party to a crime. I'm not having that. It wouldn't do any good and only lead to trouble. Dusty would pester us to death wanting to know what we were doing. Silence on our part would do nothing to relieve his anxiety. His hair would turn grey with worry. No. There's only one thing for it. I shall have it out with the Chief. The matter will then be out of our hands.'

'So you've decided to pull the Pontius Pilate trick.'

'What do you mean?'

'Wash your hands of it to keep your conscience clean. What in America I believe they call passing the buck.'

'You can call it that if you like,' retorted Biggles. 'Have you a better suggestion?'

'Frankly, old boy, no.'

'That's what I thought. All right. I'm moving off now. See you later at the Yard. So long.'

Biggles went out, hailed a cruising taxi and went to Scotland Yard to await the arrival of his superior officer, Assistant Commissioner Air Commodore Raymond, head of the Special Air Section. Later, on being informed that he was in his office, he called him on the inter-com telephone and asked for an interview. This being granted he went down.

'Good morning, Bigglesworth, what's on your mind?' greeted the Air Commodore, apparently sensing urgency from Biggles' manner.

‘What I have on my mind is a problem, sir. I’m hoping you’ll be able to relieve me of it. It has some unusual angles.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ promised the Air Commodore, sitting back in his chair and putting the tips of his fingers together, his usual position on such occasions. ‘Sit down. Cigarette? Now, what’s the trouble?’

Biggles pulled up a chair to the front of the desk. ‘I hope you’re not in a hurry, sir, because it’s rather a long story and I think you’d better hear it in detail,’ he said.

‘Proceed,’ requested the Air Commodore.

‘I suppose you wouldn’t remember a Corporal-armourer in my squadron named Miller?’

‘I can’t say that I do.’

‘Last night he came to see me with as tall a tale as I’ve heard for a long time: but knowing Miller I’m convinced it’s true. He could have no possible reason for making up such a fantastic yarn, anyway.’

‘I’m listening.’

Whereupon Biggles related the sinister story the ex-corporal had told in his flat.

When he had finished, the Air Commodore, who had not once interrupted the narrative, sat silent for the best part of a minute, his eyes on Biggles’ face. At last he said: ‘What do you expect *me* to do about this?’

‘That’s for you to tell me, sir.’

‘You didn’t expect me to give a decision here and now?’

‘No, sir. I imagined you’d need time to think about it.’

‘Had you yourself anything in mind? Or let me put it this way. What would you do if I gave you the go-ahead to handle the affair your own way?’

‘Before doing anything else, I’d try to get confirmation of the story.’

‘How would you do that?’

‘I’d see this young man, Tommy Miller, and put a few searching questions to him. I’d like to know more about this island.’

‘From what you’ve told me, I get the impression you won’t get much out of him until he’s given an undertaking that no action will be taken against him.’

‘I think probably you’re right. I can’t see him throwing himself at our mercy. That’s what it would amount to. All the same, let’s not forget he’s told his father what he’s done and was willing for his father to come to me.’

‘Isn’t that throwing himself at our mercy?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘Why not?’

‘He could go back on the story and swear there wasn’t a word of truth in it. Then what could we do?’

The Air Commodore nodded. ‘I take your point. Even so, I couldn’t on my own responsibility promise any sort of immunity. That’s out of the question. The boy took part in a crime. I’ll talk to the Chief Commissioner about it and

see how he feels. It may be a matter for the Home Secretary. Or he may issue a warrant for young Miller's arrest.'

'I take leave to say that in my opinion that would be a daft thing to do. We're dealing with a man with a grievance. What he's gone through must have made him tough. Handle him the wrong way and he'll stick his toes in and we'd get nothing out of him. In that case you could say goodbye to the jewels and you'd never be able to build up a case against Raulstein for murder. Tommy is the only witness. I can't see him risking his life for nothing.'

'How risk his life?'

'Raulstein carries a gun and is evidently prepared to use it. Why should Tommy put his life in jeopardy by ratting on Raulstein?'

The Air Commodore frowned. 'Are you taking sides with him?'

'I'm not taking sides with him, but I think he's entitled to a certain amount of sympathy. I'm more concerned with helping his father, wretched man. Let's not forget that if the police hadn't blundered in the first place, none of this would have happened. If Tommy's a crook the police must accept responsibility for having made him one. At the moment he's trying to go straight. Get tough with him now and he'll be a crook for life. What he knows — I mean about the jewels — is worth a fortune of anybody's money.'

The Air Commodore brooded for a minute. 'There's an angle to this you don't appear to have taken into account,' he pointed out. 'The jewels are alleged to be in Labrador. Labrador is administered by Canada. The Canadian Government would expect to have some say in this matter. We can't go treasure hunting, or crook hunting, in their country just as it suits us without so much as by your leave.'

'It shouldn't be difficult to arrange that,' argued Biggles. 'Give them the facts. We may need their assistance. They'll be interested to know they have a murderer running loose. He might get up to any devilment in Canada.'

'You're assuming Raulstein is still in Canada?'

'He'll be there,' stated Biggles grimly.

'How can you be sure of that?'

'From what we know he's not the sort of man to abandon a quarter of a million pounds' worth of jewels without making an effort to get them. He knows they must still be somewhere on the island. The thought must madden him.'

'You make a point there,' conceded the Air Commodore. 'All right, Bigglesworth, leave this to me. I'll give the matter some thought and put the situation to the Chief Commissioner.'

'With respect, sir, if I know anything that will take time,' Biggles complained.

'Is there any particular hurry?'

'Not as far as the jewels are concerned, perhaps; but while we're sitting on the case, pending a decision, Miller won't be getting any sleep. Tommy,

expecting to be arrested any day, may decide to bolt, and I must say I couldn't blame him. It speaks well for him that he has told everything, bearing in mind that his wrongful imprisonment still rankles with him.'

'You've got something in mind,' guessed the Air Commodore, shrewdly. 'Out with it.'

'I thought it might be a good idea for me to have a word with Tommy Miller. So far I haven't seen him. Of course, I wouldn't make any promises: simply let him know his case is being considered at the highest level. That should be something for him to go on with; set his mind at rest for the moment, instead of watching for a police car to arrive to pick him up.'

The Air Commodore considered the proposal. 'I can't see anything wrong with that,' he said slowly. 'See him but don't give him the impression that all is forgiven.'

'You can rely on me not to do that, sir,' Biggles said, getting up. 'I'll try to contact him this evening when his father will be home from work. I'll take a witness with me — probably Ginger.'

'Just one other thing before you go,' said the Air Commodore. 'If it should be decided to send someone to the island to recover the jewels, how would you, for instance, go about it?'

'That would depend on the circumstances and conditions on the island. That's another reason why I think it would be a good thing for me to see Tommy. The first thing is to get his confidence and co-operation. Obviously it would be a waste of time to go without him. He could go straight to the place where he put the stuff. A mere description of the spot wouldn't be enough. I don't go for spade and shovel work with the prospect of digging up an entire island.'

'How would you get to it?'

'Fly.'

'Labrador is a long way off. It would mean flying the Atlantic. We haven't an aircraft on our strength suitable for such an operation.'

'What's wrong with the *Merlin*? It has the range, anyway, for the way I'd go. I'm not contemplating a direct overseas flight. I've checked with the map. My route would be Iceland, Greenland, and then straight on to Labrador, or possibly St John's, Newfoundland. That way the longest leg over water would be under eight hundred miles; and that's well within the endurance of the *Merlin*. It might be possible to get down on the actual island. That's another reason for seeing Tommy. He should know. Otherwise, to get to the objective by regular surface travel would be a long and dreary business. I'd rather arrive with my own transport.'

The Air Commodore nodded. 'Yes, I see that. The coast of Labrador isn't the easiest place in the world to get to. I'll make some inquiries. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police may be able to help us or put forward some suggestion. I shall have to get in touch with Canada if it is decided to send someone out. I only put the question to you at this stage in case it arose should

a conference be called to discuss this tricky business; for which, as far as I know, there is no precedent. I'd like to have the answers ready. In such cases as this no one is anxious to stick his neck out.'

'Which means, eventually, I imagine, that if a neck is to be stuck out it will probably be mine,' concluded Biggles tartly, from the door. 'I'll see young Miller and let you know the result. Meantime, sir, if you want me for anything, I shall be upstairs.'

He left the room.

CHAPTER 4

POINTS OF VIEW

AT a little after six o'clock the same evening, Biggles, with Ginger beside him in the car, pulled up outside the little suburban villa in Weybridge which Dusty Miller had given as his address. They got out, walked up a narrow path through a neat garden to the front door. Biggles knocked.

The door was opened by a sad-looking woman rather past middle age. 'Yes, what is it?' she inquired wearily. Then, as if a thought had struck her, she added, 'You come to take my boy away?'

'No. Not this time,' replied Biggles cheerfully. 'Is it Mrs Miller?'

'Yes.'

'I've only come to have a few words with your husband. Is he at home?'

'Yes. My son's at home too, if that's what you're really here about. Come in.' Turning, Mrs Miller called: 'It's the police, Fred.'

A door at the end of a short corridor was opened and Dusty himself, in his shirt sleeves, appeared. 'In here, sir,' he invited, backing into the room.

'What's the news?' he inquired anxiously, as Biggles and Ginger followed him in. 'Take a seat, sir.'

'No news, I'm afraid,' answered Biggles. 'No bad news, anyway. Not so far,' he added cautiously, observing that Dusty was not alone in the sitting-room. 'I've brought one of my pilot officers with me. You saw him in my flat.'

'That's right, sir. And this is my boy Tommy I told you about.'

Slouched in an easy chair was a young man carelessly dressed in a polo-necked pullover and tight-fitting slacks. He wore his hair rather long. His face was lean and pale, showing the cheek bones, as if he had been through an illness. His expression was taciturn, and the eyes he turned on the visitors were sullen with suspicion. He did not move.

Dusty said: 'Tommy, this is my old C.O. I told you about.'

Tommy nodded. 'Brought the handcuffs with you?' he inquired sourly.

'I shan't need them this evening, possibly not at all,' returned Biggles easily, perceiving from Tommy's uncompromising manner that the interview would require tact if he was to get anywhere. Dusty's son had obviously adopted a barrier of reserve which might be difficult to break through. He went on, casually: 'You know your father has told me about your adventures?'

'So he tells me.'

'I thought it might be a good thing if we had a chat, heart to heart, so to speak.'

'What you mean is, you want to ask a lot of questions.'

'Yes. But you needn't answer them if you don't want to. I shan't try to

force you. Please try to understand that my purpose in coming here is to try to help you.'

'I'll believe that when you've proved it. As far as I'm concerned you're just another cop.'

'If you're going to take that attitude I'm afraid we shan't get very far,' Biggles said reprovingly.

'That's all right with me,' returned the boy nonchalantly.

'It may be all right with you, but have you no regard for your parents?' came back Biggles curtly. 'I don't want to waste my time.'

'What do you want to know?'

'That's better. First of all let's get this clear. Are you or are you not prepared to help us with our inquiries? If you're not, say so, and you can go your own way.'

'It depends on what you want to know.'

'I want to know as much as you can tell us about the jewel robbery and about this crook Raulstein. I also want to know if you're prepared to show us where you hid the jewels.'

Tommy thought for a moment. 'I'll talk under certain conditions,' he decided.

'What conditions have you in mind?'

'That I'm left alone afterwards.'

'I can't give you any guarantee of that at the moment. I've already said, I'll do what I can. That's the only reason why I'm here. We'll talk about that later. If we catch Raulstein, are you prepared to give evidence against him? In other words, turn Queen's Evidence?'

'Yes. I'll do that. I'd see him hanged, the dirty murderer.'

'Fair enough. Now you're talking sense. When did you last see him?'

'The morning I left Rankinton. That's the village where Campbell took us. I've just remembered the name of the place. I was only there for one night. In the morning I walked out and I didn't see either Raulstein or Campbell again. I'd had all I wanted of that swine Raulstein. Besides—' Tommy smiled faintly — 'I thought he might remember I'd still got that ring Lew Darris dropped. He'd have made me hand it over — or else. He'd still got his gun.'

'And you haven't seen or heard of him since?'

'No.'

'Did you get the impression that he intended to stay on at Rankinton?'

'Of course. He said so. His idea, he told me, was to pinch a boat and go back to the island to collect the swag. If necessary we'd tell Campbell about it, get him to take us across, then bump him off and take his boat. I wasn't standing for that, but of course I didn't tell him so.'

'But Raulstein didn't know where the swag was.'

'He reckoned he'd be able to find it. It couldn't be far from the cabin.'

'Could he find it?'

'Without me he hadn't a hope.' Tommy, having started, was talking more

freely.

‘I see,’ continued Biggles. ‘Now about this island — Marten Island.’

‘That’s what Campbell called it. We didn’t know.’

‘What sort of place is it? Can you give me a description? What I’m really trying to get at is, since someone may have to go there, is there any place where a plane might land?’

‘Are you thinking of flying there?’ asked Tommy, looking surprised.

‘If I was sent I would prefer to fly provided there was a place to get down.’

‘Well, in a way it’s a bit unusual. Most islands I’ve seen are flat round the coast and rise up to a hill in the middle. Marten Island goes the other way. Round the outside it’s rocky and hilly, mostly cliffs, but the middle seems to be a sort of basin, like a big crater. I didn’t see much of it, but from what I remember it’s mostly flat, with the ground soft and boggy, with rushes in places as if there was a lake there sometime. There still may be one in the spring or early summer when the snow melts. We were there in the autumn, but Campbell did say something about his most difficult time being the winter because of the snow. That was one of the reasons why he’d built the log cabin, in case he got stuck.’

‘Why did he go to the island at all in winter if the weather could be as bad as that?’

‘He had to go to put down food for his foxes so they didn’t starve to death, which they might as there wasn’t much natural food there for ‘em except dead fish washed up on the beaches. They get a certain amount of protection from the weather in the woods, which are nearly all fir trees, growing pretty close together.’

Dusty put in a word. ‘You said something to me about fog.’

‘That’s right. It was foggy on and off most of the time we were there. Campbell said the whole coast was foggy.’

‘It would be,’ murmured Biggles. ‘This flat area in the middle of the island you spoke about. Would it be possible to land a plane on it?’

‘I don’t know much about flying, but I reckon it should be possible if the plane was a small one. I couldn’t imagine a big jet landing there; the ground wouldn’t be long enough for that. But why bother with the island? What’s wrong with landing at Rankinton on the mainland? It’s only just across the water. There’s an aerodrome there.’

Biggles’ eyebrows went up. ‘An aerodrome!’

‘Yes, I saw it. But I don’t know if it’s a public one.’

‘How does that happen?’

‘It’s a local post for the Mounties — you know, the Canadian Mounted Police — when they’re working in the district. They use more planes now than horses, so Campbell told us. There’s a radio station there, too. No doubt they’d let you use the place, you being a copper, even if it’s only for official use. I saw a plane land when I was there. A small one. A Mountie got out. Smart feller. I asked him to give me a lift to some place, but he said he wasn’t

allowed to do that.'

'Did you say anything to him about Raulstein, or how you happened to be there?'

'Not me,' stated Tommy cogently. 'I didn't fancy being thrown into quod in Canada; it's bad enough here.'

'As far as you know Raulstein stayed on in Rankinton with the object of going back to the island for the swag?'

'I reckon he wouldn't leave without it.'

'But you don't think he's got much chance of finding it?'

'Not an earthly. Even if he knew the stuff had been pushed down a hole, it'd take him the rest of his life to dig out all the holes on that perishing island, and still he might not find it.'

'But you could go straight to the spot?'

'I put it where it is, didn't I? No one else knows.'

'That brings me to what is perhaps the most important question of all,' Biggles said seriously. 'If I was ordered to fly out to bring the stuff home, would you come with me and show me the place?'

'That needs thinking about,' replied Tommy, reverting to his earlier attitude of suspicion and mistrust. 'As I see it, knowing what I know is the only trump card I hold against being nicked.'

'Don't fool yourself, Tommy,' advised Biggles sternly. 'You hang on to that trump too long and you may find yourself in the nick anyway. Remember, there's been a witness to this conversation. You're in no position to dictate terms to the police.'

'The jewels were insured, weren't they?'

'Yes.'

'And the insurance company have offered the usual reward for their recovery. What's wrong with me going to the insurance people and letting 'em know I could tell 'em where the jewels are?'

'You say what's wrong? There's quite a lot wrong. I think you've forgotten something,' Biggles said. 'You'll find the reward is offered for the return of the stolen property *and the conviction of the guilty party*. No conviction, no reward. That's a very different cup of tea. The money wouldn't be much use to you if you found yourself inside doing a ten-year stretch. What are you going to do about that?'

Tommy's face fell. 'I should have known there'd be a trick in it,' he muttered bitterly.

Dusty came in again. 'You might as well come clean, lad. It'll pay you in the long run. Trust the police to give you a square deal. You've gone too far, anyhow, to back out now. That's right, sir, isn't it?' Dusty looked at Biggles.

'That's about the size of it,' Biggles answered. 'How about it, Tommy?'

'I'm not really thinking of any reward,' declared Tommy. 'All I want is to be left alone.'

Biggles shrugged. 'Well, it's in your own hands. Please yourself. I'll leave

you to think it over. There's no great hurry.' He got up. 'That's all for now. I'll come back later to see what you've decided to do. One final word of advice. Don't try to run away. You wouldn't get far. If you did you'd take your problem with you and you'd have to carry it for the rest of your life.'

'That's what I keep telling him,' said Dusty as he saw Biggles and Ginger to the door.

Outside, as they got into the car, Ginger observed: 'A hard nut to crack.'

'All nuts can be cracked if you squeeze 'em hard enough,' returned Biggles. 'Don't worry. He isn't a fool. Unless I'm mistaken he's got enough common sense to see which way the wind blows and not try to go against it. Dusty will do his best to see he does that.'

'I could see at once he'd made up his mind to be awkward.'

'Not so much awkward as obstinate. We can all be that on occasion. I had to take a chance and be firm with him, knowing he'd either come round and be co-operative, or dig his toes in still harder, in which case we'd have got nothing out of him. As it happened it worked. Having broken the ice, he'll be all right with me from now on. The rest depends on how the Home Office decides to deal with him. That will either make or break him. He's not a bad lad. You might call him a victim of circumstances. We shall see.' Biggles drove on.

CHAPTER 5

BIGGLES SPEAKS HIS MIND

BIGGLES did not see his Chief again that day, but the following morning he was called to his office.

‘Well, how did you get on?’ inquired the Air Commodore. ‘Did you see young Miller?’

‘Yes, sir. He was inclined to be difficult at first; that was to be expected. He has no reason to love us. But at the finish, with careful handling, he was as open as I could have wished.’

‘What did you make of him; his general character, as a type?’

‘I’d say inherently he’s as straight as a gun barrel. But for that unfortunate incident of the stolen car, he would never have gone off the rails. That was the cause of all the trouble that followed.’

‘In what sort of mood did you leave him?’

‘On the whole, good, although still a trifle suspicious of our intentions. Once he realized I hadn’t come to jump on him, he seemed to be glad to have the opportunity to get the whole business off his chest.’

‘Did he make demands?’

‘Not exactly demands; but in return for coming clean, he obviously expects to be treated leniently.’

‘Did he tell you where the stolen goods were hidden?’

‘I already knew that. He pushed them down a foxhole; but as apparently the whole island is a honeycomb of holes, it would be difficult for him to pinpoint the actual one. He’d have to go with a recovery party to point it out, or the search might take weeks, or even months.’

‘I see,’ returned the Air Commodore thoughtfully. ‘I have a reason for asking these questions. Yesterday, after seeing you, I had a long talk with the Chief Commissioner and explained the position to him. His first reaction was to issue a warrant right away for the arrest of young Miller.’

‘That’s what I thought might happen,’ Biggles said sadly. ‘Well, you do that and you’ll have a prisoner; but you’ll never see the diamonds. Miller would close up like an oyster; which means you’d never have a case against Raulstein, even if you caught him.’

The Air Commodore raised a hand. ‘Gently. There’s no need to go off at the deep end. What I said was the Chief’s *first* reaction. On consideration he had second thoughts. That doesn’t mean he’s prepared to overlook what Miller has done. Nor will he bargain with him. Not for a moment. That’s out. Definitely.’

‘Then what *is* he prepared to do?’

‘He’s willing to go a little way. To hold his hand before making a final decision. In short, if Miller will produce the stolen property and make a full

statement as to how it came into his possession, he will review the whole case in the most favourable light possible in the circumstances. How's that?"

Biggles did not answer.

'You could hardly expect him to do more,' said the Air Commodore.

Biggles agreed.

'Miller can't expect to get off scot-free,' persisted the Air Commodore.

'I don't see why not,' argued Biggles. 'No self-confessed criminal ever made a more determined effort to do the right thing. Put him in prison, no matter for how short a time, and where does that get you? All that would do would be to make him a criminal for the rest of his days. Oh yes, I know the law, and I realize it has to take a rigid line; but that shouldn't mean there could never be an exception. After all, what are we trying to do — make criminals or prevent people from going crooked?'

The Air Commodore ignored the question. 'It has been suggested that you fly out to Labrador and bring home the jewellery. In view of what you tell me, that, it seems, would mean taking Miller with you.'

'It would, otherwise it would be a waste of time to go there,' stated Biggles. 'But if the idea is to let Miller fetch the stuff, and arrest him when he's handed it over, you can get somebody else to go because I'll have nothing to do with it. To gain his confidence and then rat on him at the finish... What sort of low-down hound would that make me?'

The Air Commodore looked uncomfortable. 'I'm afraid it's the best bargain he'll get.'

Biggles' forehead puckered in a frown. 'Bargain! Did you say bargain? For whom? For us, perhaps. But it takes two to make a bargain, and if I'm any judge of a man, young Miller isn't likely to jump at this one. And I can't say I'd blame him.'

'What don't you like?'

'It's too one-sided. We'd get information we'd never otherwise have had; we collect a fortune in jewels and the evidence we need to convict a man known to be a murderer. What does Miller get out of it? Nothing, as far as I can see.'

'He may get his liberty.'

'I don't like the word *may*. Does he get it or doesn't he? If he does it's only what he's got already. By accepting our terms, which smell like an ultimatum, he's more likely to lose it.'

'They aren't *my* terms,' retorted the Air Commodore.

'I don't care whose terms they are. They leave a nasty taste in my mouth.'

'Be careful what you say, Bigglesworth,' warned the Air Commodore stiffly. 'Which side are you on?'

'It isn't a matter of taking sides, sir. I believe in giving a man a fair deal.'

'Is this what you want to tell the Chief Commissioner?'

'That's up to you, sir.'

'If I repeat what you've said, he may send someone else to fetch the

jewels.'

'That'd suit me, sir,' replied Biggles bluntly. 'I'm not straining at the leash to take on a sub-polar flight. Let someone else go. I wish him joy in trying to persuade Tommy Miller to show him his foxhole if he smells a rat in it as well as a bag of swag.'

'You're in one of your difficult moods,' sighed the Air Commodore.

'I'm being myself, sir; and you've known me long enough to be aware that I don't take kindly to any sort of underhand play.'

'Well, I'll tell you what I'll do,' the Air Commodore said. 'I'll have another word with the Chief—'

'Please don't get unpopular with him on my account.'

'What exactly *do* you want?'

'I want his word that if I take Miller to Labrador and bring home the stolen property, he will not be arrested on his return. It's as simple as that. Of course, should he then go to the police on his own account and ask to be taken into custody, it would be a different matter.'

'I'll tell the Chief what you say, although that may mean a rap on the knuckles for both of us, for threatening insubordination,' offered the Air Commodore. 'Meanwhile you might speak to young Miller again to see how he feels about it.'

'I'll do that, sir, although as he has already told me all he knows, and what he thinks, I can't see what good that will do.'

'At the same time I'll get in touch with Canada to see how they feel about all this. Let's leave it at that for the time being. I'll let you know when I have anything definite to tell you,' concluded the Air Commodore.

'Fair enough, sir.'

Biggles departed.

CHAPTER 6

MIXED NEWS

‘LAND-HO!’ SO sang police pilot Bertie Lissie, sitting beside Biggles in the control cabin of the *Merlin*, the twin-engined 8-seater aircraft on the establishment of the Air Police for long-distance operations.

‘I’m relieved to see it,’ stated Biggles calmly. ‘I’m never comfortable when there’s nothing but water under me, particularly when the water is as cold as it must be here. You might go aft and let the others know we’re nearly there.’

The others, in the main cabin, consisted of Ginger and the only civilian passenger, Tommy Miller.

Bertie conveyed the message and returned.

‘All we have to do now is find Rankinton and the landing ground which Tommy says is there, near the village,’ remarked Biggles.

‘That should not be too difficult, old boy,’ replied Bertie brightly.

‘It may not be too easy,’ Biggles said seriously. ‘I’ve had some experience at this sort of caper, trying to find something you’ve never seen, so you don’t know what it looks like from topsides.’

‘You won’t have a dekko at the island in passing?’

‘Not me! That may be even more difficult to mark. Let’s get our wheels on the ground and stretch our legs before we start fiddling with islands. I doubt if we’d find Marten Island before we make a landfall. According to the map there are scores of islands, large and small, along this stretch of coast.’

‘How about Tommy? He’s been there.’

‘I doubt if he’d recognize it from the air.’

Three weeks had elapsed since Biggles, in a final interview with the Air Commodore, had agreed to undertake the mission to recover the stolen jewellery. The Atlantic, as he had suggested, had been crossed in three jumps, via Iceland and Greenland, where oil and fuel tanks had been topped up. What could only be the mainland of North America was now in sight.

There had been no trouble on the way, refuelling arrangements having been made before the start with the authorities concerned. There had been no difficulty about that. Nevertheless, as Biggles had observed, it is always comforting to see the objective after a long over-water flight, particularly a stretch of ocean from which there would be little hope of rescue in the event of engine failure. True, the *Merlin* would have been able to hold her height on a single engine, but the strain of flying with no reserve of power would have been disquieting, to say the least.

The final interview with the Air Commodore, who had acted as a sort of link between Biggles and Tommy at one end and the Higher Authority at the other, had ended in something in the nature of a compromise, one which,

while not entirely satisfactory from Biggles' point of view, had to be accepted; and had in fact been agreed to by Tommy, although with understandable reluctance.

It was simply this: It was now up to Tommy to prove his statement about the Regent Street jewel raid and all that had followed it, the most important item, of course, being the recovery of the stolen property. If Tommy would do that his case would be examined in the best possible light. No definite promise of anything could be given, but it was hinted that a free pardon might be forthcoming if all went well. This was the proposition which Biggles had to convey to Tommy, and it had needed all his powers of persuasion to get him to agree. The deciding factor may have been an assurance that, if he refused to accept the terms, he would certainly be arrested and brought to trial. Dusty had advised his son to do what was required of him for his own sake, whatever might be the ultimate verdict.

So Tommy had accepted, and all that then remained to be done was the organization of the expedition. This, of course, had been left to Biggles, while the Air Commodore, on his part, would arrange matters with the Canadian Government and as far as possible with the local authorities. These were still in progress when the *Merlin* had left England, so Biggles still did not know exactly what sort of reception to expect. It had, however, been confirmed that there was a landing ground at Rankinton, but with no permanent staff, although refuelling and radio facilities were available. This was all Biggles really needed to know. It was enough.

With the mainland in view the next step was to locate the small settlement of Rankinton. On a sparsely inhabited coast this was not expected to be easy. Nor was it. The country looked wild and rugged, much of it under forest; and off-shore islands were numerous. Tommy, having seen the place only from ground level, could do little to help. Biggles, in making the crossing by dead-reckoning, had deliberately inclined towards the north, the tip of Labrador at the entrance to Hudson Bay, this being the shortest sea crossing. He now felt safe in heading south down the deeply indented coastline.

This proved to be correct, and it was his questing eyes that spotted an open area with a white circle in the middle near a seaside settlement. A shed and a wind-stocking on a pole at one end could only mean one thing. Landing grounds here, he thought, must be few and far between, so he went low for a closer investigation. A helicopter standing near the shed was all the inducement he needed to land. If nothing more, he would be able to ascertain his position and so get a line on his destination should this not be it.

Having checked the wind by the wind-sock, he landed and taxied on towards the shed in which presumably the helicopter was housed. As he neared it a man emerged and stood waiting, from his conspicuous and well-known uniform a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. From head to foot he was immaculate.

'Smart lad,' remarked Biggles approvingly as they approached.

The police officer did in fact look little more than a lad, although he must have been a year or two older than his slim figure and lean, clean-shaven face suggested. His hand went to the level of a pair of shrewd eyes in a formal salute. 'Inspector Bigglesworth from England, I think.'

'That's right,' acknowledged Biggles.

'Jack Fraser, sir, at your service.'

Smiling, Biggles offered a hand, 'Pleased to meet you. You seemed to be expecting me.'

'Sure. That's why I'm here. I was detailed by the head office to meet you and give you any assistance you may need.'

'Good. Were you told why we were coming here?'

'No. My orders were to stand by in case I was wanted. I have the keys of this depot should you want to refuel or use the radio.'

'Thanks. We shall have to fill up before we go any farther, but there's no immediate hurry about that. Are you going to stay here?'

'For as long as I'm wanted.'

'Fine. I shall need some information. But let me introduce my friends,' Biggles went on as Ginger and Tommy joined the party. The introductions made, he said: 'Mind if I call you Jack? There's no need to stand on formality on a job of this sort. I'm usually called Biggles. Less of a mouthful than my full name.'

'Okay with me,' agreed Fraser, smiling.

Biggles indicated the helicopter. 'This your machine?'

'Sure.'

'So you flew up?'

'Easiest way to get about here.' Fraser was evidently a man of few words.

'Do you know this district?'

'Pretty well. I cover this stretch of territory. But we needn't stand here. Come inside. I've a pot of coffee on the stove.'

The visitors followed the officer into a cabin where a bench provided seats.

'Perhaps you can tell me this,' Biggles said as cups of coffee were handed round. 'We shall need accommodation for the time we're here, although how long that will be I don't know. Do you know of a place where we can put up?'

'There's a joint on the waterfront called the Blue Dolphin, sort of pub, general store and post-office. I know Charley Murray who runs it. He acts as a general factotum. He's all right. It may be a bit rough by your standards, but Mrs Murray is a good cook.'

'Don't worry,' answered Biggles. 'If we have any standards we don't bring them with us.'

'I'll show you the place. It's only a short walk down the hill.'

'Will my machine be all right here?'

'No one here's likely to interfere with it. No matter what it looks like, this is a law-abiding community. We might be able to squeeze your machine into the shed if there's a change of weather. At present it looks set fair, but one

never knows.'

'Then we appear to have struck lucky because we have a little exploring to do.'

'In which direction, if you don't mind me asking?'

'Marten Island. Do you know it?'

Fraser raised an arm, an extended finger pointing to a dark mass out to sea. 'That's it.'

'Nice and handy,' Biggles said. 'Tell me this, Jack. Do you know anything about a man named Raulstein?'

'No. I heard there was a stranger here some time ago, but he must have moved on. Has he been up to something?'

'He's wanted for a double murder. I'll tell you more about that later. Another man I hope to see, as he may know something about him, is Angus Campbell, who I believe lives here.'

Fraser's expression changed. 'He used to live here.'

'Do you mean he's left?'

'Left for good. He's dead.'

Biggles stared. '*Dead!*'

'You're talking about the guy who ran a fox farm on Marten Island?'

'That's right. What did he die of? I understand he wasn't an old man.'

'All I can tell you is he's presumed dead. Drowned at sea.'

'How did that happen?'

'He had a power boat for getting to and from his island. He went out one day and he didn't come back. That's all we know. Nobody saw anything. He hasn't shown up, so we can only assume he had an accident, boat capsized, ran into fog or something. Accidents of that sort are not uncommon here. It's a dangerous coast for any sort of craft. Anything can happen here.'

'So I imagine.' Biggles thought for a moment or two. 'Had you any reason to suspect foul play?'

Fraser's eyes opened wide. 'Good Lor', no. What reason could there be for anything of that sort in a place like this? Campbell had nothing of value. He never behaved as if he'd got a lot of money.'

'What about his boat?'

'If his engine packed up he might have tried to swim ashore and couldn't make it. In that case the boat would probably drift out to sea.'

Biggles caught Tommy's eye and frowned a warning to him to say nothing. He turned back to the Canadian. 'Was Campbell alone on his last trip?'

'As far as anyone knows. I suppose so. He always went alone.'

'Have you, or has anyone else, been to Marten Island since this happened?'

'Not that I know of. Campbell's brother, Ian, who lives in Toronto, being his next of kin, was informed of what had happened. He came up to settle affairs. He didn't stay long. There's no one in the house now.'

'Have you ever been to Marten Island?' inquired Biggles.

'No. Never had cause.'

‘Has anyone been lately?’

‘Not as far as I know. No reason for anyone to go there.’

‘Do the off-shore fishermen never land there?’

‘They keep well clear. There are dangerous currents and a rip tide, not to mention the risk of fog.’

‘What about the foxes? Wouldn’t it be worth someone’s while to trap some of them?’

‘That would be poaching. No one has any right to touch them. Campbell had the place on lease and it still has over a year to run. Meanwhile it remains his property. What’ll happen when the lease expires I don’t know. Maybe Ian will renew the lease. If he doesn’t and no one else wants it, I suppose it will become free to all, like most of the other islands. Any foxes that are left will have to fend for themselves.’

While this conversation had been going on the party, having finished the coffee, had been walking down a slight incline towards the settlement — Rankinton could not claim to be much more than that — with its tiny natural harbour which, by providing a haven for a few fishing boats, was probably the reason for it being there. Approaching the cluster of timber-built dwellings, Tommy touched Biggles on the arm and pointed to a house that stood a little apart from the rest.

‘That’s where Campbell lived,’ he said.

Had the visitors not been told that the owner was no longer in residence, it would have been apparent that the house was not occupied. Weather-worn, a window broken, a smokeless chimney, the surrounding ground overgrown with weeds, the place wore the melancholy look that a house quickly adopts when it is left empty.

‘Yes, that’s where Campbell lived,’ confirmed Fraser. Then a thought seemed to strike him. He looked at Tommy sharply. ‘How did you know?’

‘He once spent a night there,’ explained Biggles casually. ‘Why has no one taken possession?’

‘Legally it remains Campbell’s property until there’s proof of his death, unless his brother puts in a claim. He never comes near the place, which I can understand. One needs a reason to settle in a remote spot like this, for half the year practically out of touch with civilization except by radio.’

Biggles paused to look again across the grey water to the island they had come so far to visit.

‘You seem mighty interested in Marten Island,’ remarked Fraser curiously. ‘Is there some reason?’

‘A very good reason,’ returned Biggles. ‘That, in fact, is why we’re here. We’re going over to it. I suppose we could hire a boat to get us across? It would be a simple matter to fly, but there would be no point in that unless we knew there was a place to land.’

‘I’ll run you across in my ‘copter to have a look round if you like,’ offered Fraser. ‘I don’t need much room to put myself down.’

‘Thanks. That’s uncommonly kind of you,’ accepted Biggles. ‘I’ll take you up on that.’

‘Not at all. I was sent here to help in any way I could.’

‘You must be wondering why we want to go there?’

‘Frankly, as you mention it, I am. But here it’s considered impolite to ask questions that might be embarrassing.’

‘Well, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t know,’ Biggles said, having decided that the best policy would be to tell the whole truth. In fact, in the circumstances they could hardly do otherwise, particularly as Fraser was likely to be a useful and trustworthy friend. He went on: ‘When we’ve had a rest and a meal and a tidy up, I’ll tell you all about it.’

‘That’s up to you,’ stated Fraser. ‘I’m here to help. That doesn’t mean you have to take me into your confidence if you’d rather not.’

The Canadian had now stopped in front of a large frame-timber building facing the harbour. ‘This is Charley Murray’s place,’ he stated. ‘Come in and meet him. Always being on the spot, he may be able to help you with your inquiries. Then I shall have to be getting back to the post. I have to send some signals. Your people at home have asked to be informed of your safe arrival.’

‘Fair enough,’ agreed Biggles. ‘I’ll tell you what, Jack. Will you come along at, say, six o’clock and have a meal with us? The story I have to tell is a long one and may take time. But you’d better hear it, so that you can set your own clock right. Meanwhile I’ll ask Charley if he knows anything. He may be able to tell us when Raulstein left here. It wouldn’t have surprised me to find him still hanging about.’

‘He isn’t here now, or I’d have seen or heard something of him,’ Fraser said.

They went in, and a minute later were talking to a small, wiry man with a freckled face and flaming red hair who had not entirely lost his Scottish accent. Charley Murray.

¹ The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, formerly the North West Mounted Police, the most celebrated uniformed military police in the world, was formed in 1873 with the object of pacifying the Red Indians after their rebellion in 1671. Posts were set up on the plains where life had become hazardous for the thin population of settlers. One of their tasks was to distribute food to the half-starving Indians of the prairies as they made their way to lands reserved for them. The Indians soon came to regard the men in the scarlet jackets — the colour appealed to them — as friends to be trusted. The ‘Mounties’ then took over the work of maintaining law and order in the ‘bad lands’ where they established a reputation for integrity, fairness and courage. In 1920 the name of the corps was changed to Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

CHAPTER 7

THE PLAN

‘HELLO, Charley,’ greeted Fraser. ‘I’ve brought along some friends of mine. They’ve just arrived from England. They want to stay a few days, so I’m hoping you’ll be able to fix them up.’

‘Okay, Jack,’ said Charley. ‘Friends of yours are friends of mine. You know I’ve only single rooms if that’s all right? There’s nobody in ‘em right now, so they can pick their own.’

‘As long as the rooms have beds in ‘em they’ll do for us,’ stated Biggles cheerfully.

‘Now that’s fixed I’ll leave you to Charley,’ Fraser said to Biggles. ‘See you later. Meantime if there looks like being a change in the weather, and anything can happen this time o’ the year, you’d better come up to the airfield and put your plane under cover.’

‘I’ll watch it,’ returned Biggles. ‘We shan’t be using her again today, so we’ll fill her up in the morning.’ He turned to Ginger. ‘You might walk up with Jack and bring our kit along.’

‘I’m on my way,’ Ginger agreed, and followed Fraser out.

While they were waiting, Biggles and the others sat at one of the plain wooden tables with which the room was provided. It might have been called a rather primitive saloon in that it had a bar with bottles on shelves behind it. Biggles lit a cigarette, called for drinks and invited the proprietor to join them. Which he did.

‘In case you’re wondering what we’re doing in Rankinton, we’re interested in a man named Raulstein,’ Biggles said. ‘We have reason to believe he was in these parts not so long ago. Did you see anything of him?’

Charley scowled, his eyes narrowing. ‘He a pal of yours?’

‘Anything but.’

Charley looked relieved. ‘I’m glad to hear that.’

‘Why?’

‘He’s a skunk. He stinks.’

Biggles smiled faintly. ‘Oh. So you found that out.’

‘If you’re looking for him you’re not likely to find him here,’ volunteered Charley. ‘He won’t come back. Not him.’

‘I gather he wasn’t popular,’ prompted Biggles.

‘He stayed here for a week, borrowed twenty dollars off me — which he forgot to pay back — and then slipped off without settling for his board and lodging, or the drinks he put on the slate at the bar,’ growled Charley in a voice cold with disgust.

‘There are people in the world like that,’ Biggles said. ‘In England we have a name for ‘em.’

‘What are you looking for him for?’

‘He’s wanted in England by the police. And I might as well tell you— but keep this to yourself—I’m a police officer. That’s why Jack Fraser was here to meet us.’

‘So that’s it,’ Charley said understandingly. ‘I hope you find the rat. We can do without his sort here. If there’s anything I can do to help, just say the word.’

‘If you feel like that, maybe you wouldn’t mind me asking a few questions?’

‘Anything you like.’

‘Do you know how Raulstein got here?’

‘Angus Campbell brought him along. I understand he picked him up somewhere. He told me on the quiet he didn’t know anything about him. He’d put him up for a couple o’ nights. He hadn’t any luggage when he came to me apart from one or two odd things Angus had given him. Angus couldn’t do with him any longer because he had to go to St John’s on business, which meant closing the house. I believe Angus gave him a few bucks to help him along.’

‘What did Raulstein do while he was here?’

‘Just hung about, mostly. Said he was looking for a friend who’d come ashore with him. Young feller. I’m told he tried to borrow a boat. He wrote some letters.’

‘Do you know who they were to?’

‘No. I never asked. But he did say he was writing to a friend in the States who would send him some money. When it came he would pay me back. He’d run out and was borrowing off me.’

‘Did the money come?’

‘Not that I know of. He never did say much, either about himself or anything else.’

‘I can understand that,’ put in Biggles meaningly.

‘Some sort of foreigner, wasn’t he?’

‘That just about describes him.’

‘One day he went out saying he was just going for a stroll. He didn’t come back. He must have known what he was going to do, the lousy liar.’

‘And you’ve no idea where he went?’

‘No. Seems nobody saw him go. He’d see to that. To tell the truth I wasn’t sorry to see him go. He was no use. Just a no-good bum, I reckon. No use to anyone. Just a minute though. There is one feller who may know something. Joe Big Wood. He’s an Indian. Lives in a shack he built himself just out of town. Been here for years. Does odd jobs for anybody. He doesn’t miss much. I’ll have a word with him.’

Biggles changed the subject. ‘What do you think happened to Angus Campbell?’

Charley shook his head. ‘It’s hard to say. Like I said, he was going to St

John's. When he got back Raulstein had left. He must have gone across to the island. He'd made the trip often enough, so he'd know all about it. Nobody seems to have seen him go. Must have been before daylight. All we know is, someone saw his boat had gone. It hasn't shown up, so something must have gone wrong.'

'What could have happened?'

'Anything can happen in these waters.'

'You're sure Angus isn't stuck on Marten Island?'

'If he was he'd a' made a signal. We'd have seen the smoke from his fire in the cabin he's got there. Besides, one of our cod fishers, Ed Blake, called there one day on his way home to make sure. No sign of Angus or his boat. Angus would be bound to see him, or hear him calling.'

'Did Blake go to the cabin?'

'Not that I know of. He didn't say so. There wasn't no need. If Angus was there he'd have come down to him. No, something must have gone wrong. I reckon we've seen the last of Angus. Pity. He was a straight guy. Everyone liked him.'

The conversation ended when, at this juncture, Ginger returned carrying their kit-bags. As usual they were travelling light. Charley Murray took them up to their rooms and they spent the next hour cleaning up after their long journey, and getting settled in. They then went down to find the table being laid for a meal, so all they had to do was wait for their guest, Jack Fraser, the Mountie. In due course he arrived, and after a drink they sat down to an excellent meal, mostly of the fish for which the coast is famous. Biggles said nothing about the business that had brought them there until they were relaxing over coffee. Then, with a cigarette going he said: 'Jack, I promised to tell you the full story of why we're here. It's a bit long-winded, but you'd better hear the lot, so that you'll understand the position exactly. As we're in your country you have a right to know; and, moreover, we may need your assistance and I wouldn't expect you to act in the dark. The story involves a robbery and at least two murders; and, as far as we know, the man responsible may not be far away. He was last heard of here, in Rankinton. You'll hear how that came about.'

'Were these murders committed here?' inquired Fraser.

'One was, on Marten Island. The other happened on the high seas. It's not impossible that there may have been another, right here in Rankinton, in which case it'd be your business.'

'You thinking about Angus Campbell?' put in Fraser shrewdly.

'Yes.'

'And the man responsible would be Raulstein?'

'Yes. And when you've heard the story you'll understand why I'm suspicious. If I don't make myself clear, say so.'

Fraser lit his pipe. 'I'm listening,' he said. 'Go ahead.'

Then, sitting there quietly in the dimly-lighted room Biggles narrated the

tale, from beginning to end as it had been told to him by Tommy, that had brought about the present situation. He did not excuse Tommy for what he had done, but hinted at the extenuating circumstances. He explained that Tommy was now trying to clear himself.

Fraser did not once interrupt. When Biggles had concluded the story with: 'That's all. Now you know the lot,' he sat silent for a little while, blue tobacco smoke drifting up from his pipe. Then he said: 'So you've really come to recover the jewellery Tommy says he hid on Marten Island?'

'That's one of the reasons. We'd also like to get track of Raulstein in case he goes back to England, as he might. Of course, if you pick him up in Canada, it'll be up to you to deal with him for the murder of Darris, as that happened in your country. It's true I intended to make my first job the recovery of the jewels: or check that they're still where Tommy put them. I reckoned it would mean hiring a boat.'

'That shouldn't take long,' Fraser said. 'I can see how you're fixed for getting a foot on the island. You needn't bother about a boat. I'll fly you across in the morning. If nothing else it would enable you to look over the ground. I should be able to put you down if you felt like finishing the job right away. I don't need much room to get on the floor.'

'Thanks a lot,' accepted Biggles. 'That'd be a great help. You might like to have a look round yourself.'

'Thinking of Campbell?'

'Yes. Not forgetting Raulstein. He may somehow have managed to get back there. He must know the jewels are still somewhere on the island, and he wouldn't be likely to pack up without making an effort, however desperate, to get his hands on them.'

'So I imagine,' agreed the Canadian. 'Okay, then. Let's leave it like that. Will you come up to the airfield in the morning?'

'Of course. What time would suit you?'

'As soon after daylight as possible.'

'Right you are, then,' Biggles said. 'We'll be along bright and early.'

Fraser got up. 'Okay. If that's fixed I'll get back to my quarters in case any signals come through. See you in the morning. Thanks for the meal, and for putting your cards on the table.' He put on his hat and with a parting wave went off.

'Having him here is a slice of luck I didn't expect,' Biggles said as the door closed behind him.

A little later, when Charley Murray came to clear the table, he had something to say. 'I've had a word with Joe Big Wood like I said I would. Found him in his shack. He couldn't tell me much, but he's pretty sure he saw Raulstein leave Rankinton.'

'How did he go, and which way?'

'On foot towards the south, on the old trail that runs alongside the timber back o' the cliffs.'

‘What is there in that direction — anything?’

‘Nothin’. Well, that is, nothin’ for ten miles when you come to a creek at the mouth of Little Fish River. There are a few houses there and a small salmon canning factory.’

‘Then there must be some way to get the stuff to market — road, railway...’

‘A boat, a coaster, comes up from the south once a fortnight when the weather’s open, to bring in passengers and stores and take back anyone or anything wanting to go, mostly fish, furs, and so on.’

‘Then Raulstein could have cleared out of the territory that way?’

‘I guess so. It’s the easiest way to the outside. Coopers Creek — that’s the name of the place — is as far north as the boat comes.’

‘Would Raulstein know about this place?’

‘Angus Campbell might have told him. I’ve known him use this trail himself, sometimes, before they made an airfield here for a plane to bring up the mail.’

‘I see,’ Biggles said thoughtfully. ‘Would Jack Fraser be in touch with Coopers Creek?’

‘Sure. By radio. There’s a Mountie stationed there.’

‘Thanks, Charley,’ acknowledged Biggles. ‘You’ve been most helpful.’

After Charley had gone Biggles sat deep in thought for a minute or two. Then, looking at Tommy, he queried: ‘You could find your way to the airfield in the dark?’

‘Shouldn’t be any trouble about that.’

‘Then you might slip along and tell Jack Fraser I’d be obliged if he’d contact the officer at Coopers Creek and ask him if Raulstein is there; or if anything’s been seen of him. I’m asking you to go because if necessary you could give a description of Raulstein. You’re the only one of us who’s seen him. You needn’t wait. He can give us the answer in the morning.’

Tommy got up. ‘I’ll go right away. You needn’t wait up for me.’ He went off on his errand.

‘I think we might all hit the hay,’ Biggles said, rising. ‘It wouldn’t be a bad thing to start with a good night’s rest.’

‘I’m with you,’ Bertie agreed.

‘And me,’ stated Ginger.

CHAPTER 8

THE SNAG

IT was still barely daylight the following morning when the party from England joined the CM.P. officer at the airstrip. The landing ground was little more than that, but it served its purpose. They found him ready and waiting.

The morning was fair, clear, but with an autumnal nip in the air, which brought from Bertie the wish that he'd brought his winter woollies. Biggles' first remark on meeting Fraser was they looked like being lucky as far as the weather was concerned.

'I hope you're right,' returned Fraser, looking at the ocean where a thin grey mist hung over the water, making ghosts of a few boats on their way to the fishing grounds.

'Is there any doubt about it?' asked Biggles.

'I wouldn't trust it too far,' was the reply. 'In this part of the world anything can happen. The weather can change inside an hour. The biggest curse is fog, due to warm currents from the south meeting cold currents coming down from the north.'

'Then let's get on with the job,' suggested Biggles cheerfully. 'What we have to do shouldn't take long. By the way, did you manage to make contact with your man at Coopers Creek? Charley Murray tipped me off he'd spoken to Joe Big Wood, a local Indian.'

'Yes. Apparently Raulstein was there for some days, waiting, he said, for some friends who were coming in a launch to pick him up.'

'Did it come?'

'Yes. He went on board and that was the last seen of him. I guess he must have pulled out of the territory after all. If he's gone to the States he won't be so easy to find.'

'Why should he go to the States?'

'The launch was flying a U.S. pennant, so it's reasonable to suppose it'd go back there. Raulstein must have got in touch with someone he knew.'

'Charley Murray said he wrote some letters while he was staying at his place. He said he was trying to borrow some money. Did anyone notice the name of the launch?'

'Yes. *Grey Goose*. Motor cruiser.'

'It'd be interesting to know who these friends were,' Biggles said pensively. 'If they knew Raulstein they'd know he was a crook, and on the old adage that birds of a feather fly together, they'd probably be crooks, too.'

'I guess you've got something there,' agreed Fraser. 'Well, we can't do anything about that now, so we might as well be getting on.'

'Let's go.'

The helicopter being a four-seater, it was a bit of a squash to get everyone

in, but for the short hop, Tommy, being slim, managed to squeeze between Bertie and Ginger in the rear seat.

In minutes the machine was in the air with the country unfolding like a map below. The picture was not inspiring, except perhaps for a hunter, a trapper or a fisherman, comprising as it did, mostly, vast forests of spruce, larch and other conifers, broken here and there by the silver thread of a river. There were a few clearings where timber-felling was in progress. On the eastern side, over which the machine was flying, the land ended for the most part in gaunt cliffs with which the cold Atlantic rollers waged a never-ending war. There were many places where the sea had won a battle, judging from the deeply indented coastline.

The objective, Marten Island, a long dark shadow in the mist like a surfacing sea monster, was in view from the moment of take-off, its sombre outline hardening as they approached. Clearly it was not one of those romantic tropic isles of popular fiction.

In five minutes they were circling over it, Fraser slowly losing altitude to get as clear a view as possible of the ground. Not that there was much to see. In fact there was really nothing of note to observe; no outstanding feature; merely a forbidding coastline outlined in white foam with an occasional strip of stony beach where a cliff had collapsed under the merciless battering of the waves. For the rest it was much as Tommy had described it, and certainly as Ginger had imagined it; low rocky hills, their slopes cloaked with dismal stands of evergreen forest. It was obvious at once that there was only one possible place for an aircraft to land, and that — again as Tommy had tried to describe it — was the middle area, which appeared to be reasonably flat and covered with what looked like rough grass, although this might turn out to be moss or reeds covering a swamp. For an airman, the truth of such a surface can only be discovered by the risky process of trial and error. The whole of this area was in the nature of a shallow basin, as if it might have been the worn-down crater of a long-dead volcano.

Ginger, staring down, looked in vain for a sign of life apart from the inevitable sea birds. Even through the binoculars he had brought with him he could see no movement. There was no wind, so even the trees stood motionless, like regiments on parade. It took him some time to spot the cabin, and this only with the assistance of Tommy who knew its position, for being built of unsawn logs it showed no colour, and was, moreover, partly hidden by trees. Apart from the cliffs, the actual ground could not be seen. The woods would have concealed an army had one been there. Considered as a whole, Ginger reflected, it was not the sort of place where one would care to stay long. Luckily, this was not likely to arise — or so he thought, optimistically.

Fraser was hovering low, almost stationary, over the grass plain. 'There doesn't appear to be anyone here,' he said. 'What do you want me to do?'

'I'd like you to put us down, if it's possible,' answered Biggles. 'We shall only find out if it's safe to land by testing. I can see puddles, so the place

might be a swamp. I wouldn't ask you to take any risks on our account. It's up to you.'

'We'll soon settle it,' Fraser said, and slowly, with increasing caution, he allowed the aircraft to sink. The skids touched what, from the slight bump, felt like solid ground. The pilot leaned out of the window to make sure they were not sinking. 'Okay,' he announced, apparently satisfied that all was well. 'You can get out and see what it's really like.'

Biggles got down, and after stamping around for a while reported that the surface was reasonably hard. 'That is, as it is now,' he said. 'There's a fair amount of moss, so I wouldn't guarantee it after heavy rain. Water is bound to drain here from the hills.'

'What shall I do, then?'

'Well, as we're here we might as well collect what we came to fetch.' Biggles called to Tommy: 'How far do you reckon we are from the place?'

'About a mile. Perhaps a little more.'

Biggles turned back to the pilot. 'You can either wait here for us or move off and come to fetch us later.'

'How long are you likely to be?'

'It's hard to say exactly. I'd like to have a look at the cabin, or for signs of Campbell having been here.'

Fraser agreed. 'Yes. It might be a good idea to check.'

'Why don't you come with us?' Biggles suggested.

Fraser considered for a moment. 'No. I'd better not do that,' he decided. 'Signals may come through from headquarters and I should be at the airfield to deal with them. I'll tell you what. I'll slip across and come back for you at, shall we say, twelve noon. How's that?'

'Fair enough. We should be finished by then.' Biggles grinned. 'If for any reason you're held up, we should be able to survive by helping ourselves to the stores in the cabin. It was done before, when Raulstein came ashore.'

Fraser smiled. 'You do that. Angus wouldn't mind.'

With everyone except the pilot on the ground and the doors of the aircraft closed, the rotor blades whirled as Fraser advanced the throttle. The machine lifted, and with a final wave he swung up and away.

For a little while the others stood watching its departure. Then, turning away, Biggles said to Tommy: 'Lead on. You know the way.'

'You want me to go straight to where I hid the stuff?'

'Of course. What else?'

'I thought you might like to call at the cabin on the way. It wouldn't mean going far off our course.'

'Very well. Let's do that, although I can't get my hands on that bag of trinkets fast enough. I only hope for your sake that after coming all this way it's still there.'

'You needn't worry about that,' declared Tommy emphatically. 'It will be. That is, unless foxes have taken to wearing jewellery.'

Biggles did not smile. 'When you've had as much experience of treasure hunting as I have, you'll learn there's always a snag. Something unexpected crops up.'

'Not this time,' Tommy said. 'You'll see.'

Nothing more was said. He set off at a cracking pace towards the nearest of the trees that fringed the plain. This may have been too wet to hold the roots of tall trees, for there were places where sphagnum moss flourished — always a sign of water not far below — and they often had to splash their way through puddles.

'Good thing we didn't try to land the *Merlin* here,' remarked Ginger. 'We might have stuck.'

'Oh, I don't know,' answered Biggles casually. 'I'll risk it at a pinch. This is the lowest part we're on. The higher ground may be firmer. Anyway, I think there's enough herbage to prevent the wheels of a light machine from cutting through, provided it wasn't overloaded.'

Reaching the timber, an overcrowded wood of depressed-looking larch skirted by birch, Tommy picked a path up ground that now rose towards the perimeter of the island. 'I think I'm going right,' he said. 'Remember, I've never set foot on this part of the island before; only seen it through the trees.'

As it turned out his sense of direction was not at fault. The trees thinned, and there before them in a clearing, on a slope overlooking the sea, was the cabin, a small but solidly built hut of unsquared logs much as Tommy had described it. As they drew near his pace slackened. He stopped.

'What's the matter?' asked Biggles. 'Something wrong?'

'I don't know,' Tommy replied slowly. 'But I can tell you this much. Someone has been here since I last saw the place.'

'How do you know?'

'All this mess.' With a wave of his arm Tommy indicated an untidy accumulation of cans, cartons and bottles that lay strewn in front of the house. The litter looked as if the empty containers had simply been tossed through the door, or out of the window, for here it lay thickest.

'You think Mr Campbell may have been back,' suggested Bertie.

Tommy shook his head. 'I wouldn't think so. I can't see him doing this. When I was here he was most particular about everything being chucked in a hole that had been dug round the back for any rubbish.'

'Let's go in,' Biggles said shortly. A quick step took him to the window. He glanced inside and went on to the door. It was not locked. He opened it and they trooped in. Tommy stopped with an exclamation. 'Just look at this! Campbell didn't do that! He kept the place so tidy you'd think a woman lived here.'

His words needed no explanation. The room, to use the common expression, was a pigsty. It was clear that whoever had occupied the place had not troubled to pick up anything that had fallen on the floor. Dirty foot-marks were everywhere. There was even mud on a chair as if someone had rested his

feet on the seat. Strewn around the stove was a layer of wood ash. Cigarette ends were everywhere. The door of a cupboard hung ajar. Tommy opened it wide, exposing empty shelves. 'This is where the stores were kept,' he said in an astonished voice. 'Not a sausage.'

'It looks as if the next castaways won't be as lucky as you were,' joked Bertie. 'The place must have been raided by a pack of wolves.'

'Wolves don't carry can-openers,' put in Biggles curtly. 'Don't talk so much. This needs thinking about.' Stooping he picked up a long cigarette end and examined it closely. 'Do you know what brand of cigarettes Campbell smoked?' he asked Tommy.

'I never saw him smoke a cigarette. He always smoked a pipe.'

'This is American. That doesn't mean much. You can buy American cigarettes almost anywhere. Probably get them on the mainland. Tell me, Tommy: did Raulstein smoke?'

'Sometimes. Not all the time. It was mostly cigars. I never saw him smoke a cigarette.'

Without speaking Biggles touched the butt of a cigar lying on the floor with the toe of his shoe.

'So you think Raulstein has been here,' guessed Ginger.

Biggles nodded. 'Who else could it be? And he didn't come alone. He had at least one other person with him, someone who smoked cigarettes. Apparently they were here for some time.'

'What could they have been doing?' Ginger said.

'I'll give you one guess.'

'The launch that put in at Coopers Creek came on here,' surmised Bertie.

Again Biggles nodded. 'That's how it looks to me. I don't like this. The big question is, did they find what they were looking for? We'd better find out — and now, without wasting any more time trying to answer riddles. Come on, Tommy. Show us where you put the stuff.'

Tommy did not argue. Knowing what depended on him, it was with anxiety written on his face that he strode to the door and went out. He set off at a good pace, keeping parallel with the shore. Only once did he pause and that was to point to a spur of cliff that jutted out into the sea. 'That's the promontory where Raulstein first hid the stuff, like I told you,' he said. 'You can see the heap of rocks he piled on it.'

'Keep going,' requested Biggles.

Tommy walked on until he was a little way past the promontory; then his progress began to lose impetus. He faltered. Finally he came to a stop, staring, his lower jaw sagging with dismay. He turned shocked eyes to Biggles' face. 'Something's happened,' he blurted.

'What? Out with it,' demanded Biggles.

Tommy pointed. 'That's where I put the bag in a hole.' He seemed to have difficulty in finding words.

'You mean — under all that stuff?'

‘The stuff wasn’t there then.’

The stuff referred to was a sloping bank of earth and rock from which protruded at all angles the broken-off trunks of trees and a tangle of branches.

‘There must have been a landslide,’ stammered Tommy.

‘We can see that,’ returned Biggles evenly. ‘Where, as near as you can tell, was the foxhole?’

‘I— I don’t know.’

‘Charming,’ murmured Bertie.

Biggles went on. ‘You mean, it’s somewhere under this pile of muck?’

‘Yes.’

‘Pity,’ Biggles said. ‘Don’t worry, Tommy. I shan’t hold you responsible for a landslide.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Tommy said miserably. ‘How was I to know this would happen?’

‘You weren’t to know. One never does know what’s going wrong, but you can rely on something to happen. I seem to remember warning you to be prepared for that. Now we know.’ Biggles lit a cigarette.

CHAPTER 9

UNWELCOME VISITORS

AFTER drawing on his cigarette while considering the chaos, Biggles said: 'Can you form any idea at all, Tommy, of where the foxhole was?'

'Yes, I think I might be able to do that,' Tommy answered. 'Although all the trees being swept down makes the place look different, you understand.'

'Naturally. Well, it looks as if we're in for a spot of navvy work. We haven't time to start that today. We've no tools with us, anyway. There is this about it. If Tommy can't find the hole, knowing where it was, Raulstein wouldn't be able to find it — even if he knew the stuff was down a hole. Wherefore the bag must still be where Tommy tucked it. We have that consolation.'

Ginger put in a word. 'Raulstein, having scoffed all the grub in the cabin, must have given up the search and pushed off.'

'Let's hope you're right,' answered Biggles. 'I'm afraid this is going to be a long job; still, it's no use crying over tons of spilt earth and rocks.' He looked at his watch. 'It's time we were getting back to the rendezvous with Fraser. He may give us a hand when we tell him what's happened.'

'Let's hope he can get here, old boy,' Bertie said.

'What do you mean?'

'Look at the weather.'

The others, taken up with the dilemma presented by the landslide, looked around. Rolling in from the sea was a great blanket of white fog, blotting out everything behind it.

Biggles moved quickly. 'Let's get cracking,' he said tersely. 'There's a chance Fraser may have seen this lot coming and dashed across to collect us before the cursed stuff smothers everything. Come on.' He set off.

In the race that followed, it was obvious within five minutes that it would be lost. Before the party had covered a hundred yards, before the cabin was in sight, the advance waves of clammy moisture had overrun them, so that they had to grope to keep in touch.

'Keep close,' ordered Biggles. 'Let everyone keep hold of the man in front of him, or the next thing someone may blunder over the edge of the cliff.'

He carried on for as long as possible, but eventually he was compelled to halt, the others pressing close. 'It's no use,' he muttered. 'We can do nothing in this, except perhaps get lost and end up in a bog or go over the cliff. There's no point in trying to find the landing area, anyhow. Fraser won't be there. He'll have more sense than to take off in this. It'd take him all his time to find the island, never mind us. From the way it was travelling, by now the fog will have reached the mainland and he'll be grounded. Our best bet is the cabin — if we can find it. We shall have to wait for the stuff to lift, or

disperse; that's all there is to it.'

'How long is it likely to last, I wonder?' said Bertie.

'As far as I'm concerned you'll have to go on wondering,' returned Biggles grimly. 'I wouldn't know. Till there's another change in the wind, I suppose. I seem to recall reading that these fogs off the Newfoundland Banks, and we're in that area, can last for weeks.'

'Enchanting thought,' breathed Bertie. 'Pity Raulstein couldn't have got adrift somewhere in the tropics.'

'He didn't, so you can forget the bananas,' returned Biggles shortly. 'Let's try to get to the cabin and shut this stuff outside, or we'll soon be as wet as scrubbers. Fraser will realize how we're fixed. He'll be over as soon as it's possible.'

'We should be able to hear him if he takes off,' Ginger said.

'I doubt it. This murk is thick enough to smother anything short of a clap of thunder. Take the lead, Tommy. You may recognize something. For goodness' sake keep well clear of the cliff.'

They set off, walking slowly in single file, each man with a hand resting on the shoulder of the man in front of him. They marched in a world that had suddenly become, without the incessant mewing of the gulls, unnaturally silent. They, too, apparently, had departed, or sought sanctuary on the face of the cliffs.

As it turned out Tommy proved a good guide and the litter of rubbish round the cabin was reached without mishap. They went in. Biggles closed the door, and having wiped the accumulated beads of moisture from his eyebrows lit a cigarette. 'Get the stove going, one of you,' he ordered. 'At least we have some logs. We might as well keep warm even if we've nothing to cook.'

There was no difficulty about this, and when it was done they settled themselves within reach of the warmth as comfortably as the conditions allowed. For a time nobody spoke. There was nothing to be said. No sound came from outside. The fog had brought with it an eerie hush as if a great blanket had been thrown over the island. Time passed.

'I must say I find this pretty boring,' remarked Bertie at last, having looked in vain for a can of food of some sort that had been overlooked by the previous residents. 'It's bad enough to be stuck on a perishing lump of rock without having to starve at the same time,' he complained.

'Sorry; my fault,' growled Biggles. 'I should have had more sense than to come on a jaunt like this without emergency rations. I've always made a point of doing that, but on this occasion it did seem unnecessary. I'll never do it again.'

'Fraser said he wouldn't trust the weather,' reminded Ginger.

'I'm pretty sure he couldn't have expected anything like this, or he'd have said so.'

Another long silence followed.

It was broken by Bertie. 'Oh, here, I say, dash it all, can't we do

something?' he complained. 'It's pretty deadly just squatting here blinking at the stove like a lot of bally owls.'

'Do what?' inquired Biggles. 'Would you like me to tell the story of the Babes in the Wood?'

'No thanks. All I know is, if someone doesn't soon do something, I shall get the screaming willies.'

Tommy spoke. 'There is one thing I might do.'

'What's that?' inquired Biggles.

'Instead of doing nothing, I might go back to the landslide to see if I could find something I noticed when I was looking for a place to hide the bag. There's just a chance I might even find the foxhole. That pile of stuff may not be as thick as it looks.'

'You'd never find the place.'

'I don't see why not. I found my way back here, didn't I?'

Biggles considered the argument. 'I'll be surprised if you find anything. Still, if that's how you feel, I suppose there's no harm in trying. Okay. Please yourself. Keep clear of the cliff.'

'I shall hear the waves down below.'

'Try not to get in 'em. Don't get lost, that's all I ask. Things are bad enough as they are without having to tramp round looking for you.'

'I'll watch nothing like that happens,' promised Tommy, as he went out.

'He hasn't a hope,' predicted Ginger lugubriously.

'I can understand his anxiety,' Biggles said. 'The recovery of that bag means more to him than it does to us. His future depends on finding it. The confounded stuff really means nothing to us. To tell the truth it wouldn't break my heart if I never saw it. I wouldn't be surprised at that. I've never yet known a treasure hunt, for that's what this is, go according to plan. It always looks easy, but it never is.'

'Don't fret, old boy,' consoled Bertie. 'It'll all work out. You'll see.'

'I'm not fretting, but this waste of time is binding me rigid. Doing nothing always has rattled my nerves. Forget it.'

Another silence fell. This time a long one. An hour passed with hardly a word spoken. Two hours. From time to time Biggles got up and went to the door to study the weather conditions. They were always the same. Unchanged. Visibility nil. The fog filled the open doorway like a whitewashed wall.

'What can the young fool be doing?' he muttered once, after looking at his watch.

'If you're asking me, I'd say he's got himself well and truly lost,' replied Ginger gloomily. 'Well, I'm not going out to look for him.'

It was not long after this that they were all startled by a sudden sound, short and sharp yet flat, as if muffled by the fog. Biggles sprang to his feet. 'What the devil was that?'

'Sounded to me mighty like a gunshot, old boy,' answered Bertie calmly.

'Tommy hadn't a gun. If he had he said nothing to me about it!'

Bertie shrugged.

‘Even if he had a gun, what is there here to shoot at, anyhow?’ put in Ginger.

‘Had a crack at a fox, maybe,’ suggested Bertie, without conviction.

‘Don’t talk rot,’ snapped Biggles. ‘What would he want with a fox?’

‘Had a fancy for a fur bonnet, perhaps — you know, Wild West style.’

‘Or maybe thinking of something for the pot,’ offered Ginger.

‘I’m not trying stewed fox,’ stated Bertie. ‘We haven’t come to that yet.’

‘If it wasn’t Tommy shooting, and I don’t see how it could be, there must be someone else on the island,’ declared Biggles. ‘That’s the only answer. If —’

He broke off as from outside, near at hand, came another sound; a clang and a rattle as if someone had kicked an empty can. ‘Here comes trouble,’ he concluded sharply, feeling for the pocket where he kept his gun. He did not take it out. The door was burst open and Tommy appeared. He came in with such a rush that he stumbled and fell. His face was chalk white and there was a smear of blood on it.

‘Raulstein,’ he gasped wildly as he picked himself up. ‘He’s here.’

‘What!’

‘He’s not alone. There are others with him.’

‘What about you? Are you hurt?’

‘No. A scratch. That’s all. Raulstein shot at me. I felt the bullet sting my face.’

‘All right. Pull yourself together. Let’s have a look at it.’ Biggles examined the wound. ‘Nothing to worry about, but you’d better have a bandage on it to keep it clean,’ he decided. ‘What happened?’

‘I was on the landslide. They came on me from behind,’ explained Tommy, still breathing hard. ‘Three of ‘em. They had guns. Raulstein said he thought I’d be back. Then he wanted to know where I’d put the bag. I pretended I didn’t know what he was talking about; but he wouldn’t stand for that. He said unless I produced the bag he’d shoot me. I didn’t really think he meant it. I thought he was bluffing.’

‘Why should he bluff?’

‘I reckoned he’d realize that if he shot me he’d kill his only hope of ever finding the bag, being as I was the only one who knew where it was. Of course, he couldn’t be sure of that; but he seemed to have decided I knew. I don’t know why.’

‘The fact that you’d come back told him. For what other reason than to fetch it would you be here?’

‘Of course. I didn’t think of that.’

‘Never mind. Go on. What happened?’

‘I bolted. Made a dash for it, hoping to get in the fog before he could shoot. It was the only chance I had, because I knew that once he got his hands on the bag he’d shoot me anyway. So I ran. Somebody fired. I don’t know who it

was. I didn't stop till I got here. That's all.'

'How many of them were there?' asked Biggles.

'I saw three.'

'We only needed this,' put in Bertie, sadly.

'They must have heard the machine; probably saw us land. Even if they didn't see us, they'd guess you wouldn't be here alone,' Biggles said calmly.

'Well, now we know who made a pigsty of the cabin.'

'How did *they* get here?' Ginger wanted to know.

'That's pretty obvious. After the launch had picked up Raulstein at Coopers Creek it came on here. It must still be here, tucked away out of sight, no doubt.'

'We might have anticipated that and looked for it before we did anything else,' Bertie said.

'I didn't overlook the possibility, but there wasn't time,' answered Biggles. 'To cover the entire coast would have meant a walk of eight or ten miles over rough ground.'

'So what do we do now?' asked Ginger.

'We've no choice,' returned Biggles. 'We stay where we are. Until this infernal fog lifts we're anchored hard and fast.'

Any further discussion was cut short by a slight noise in the direction of the door. Everyone in the room looked round. A dark shadow stood framed against the fog in the open doorway. A man. He held a revolver half raised. No one needed to be told who he was. Vague shadows moved behind. No one in the room moved.

CHAPTER 10

RAULSTEIN GIVES THE ORDERS

RAULSTEIN moved slowly forward. 'Ah! so there you are, Tommy,' he said smoothly. 'I thought I'd find you here. What you want to run away for? You might have got yourself hurt. These friends of mine are liable to act hasty like. Nice little party you have here, I see.'

He came on into the room, smiling with his lips, but not with his eyes. They were as actively alert as those of a nervous sparrow. His companions followed him in. They, too, carried guns. He went on: 'There's no need for any trouble as long as no one does anything silly. Now, Tommy, where did you put it? Be a sensible lad. I've never hurt you, have I? Never laid a finger on you. Got fond of you like you was my own boy. I'll see you get your cut.' He paused, waiting for an answer.

Ginger contemplated the intruders. There was no mistaking Raulstein. He lined up with the description Tommy had given of him. Swarthy, black-haired and dark-eyed, with a suave, ingratiating manner, he was typical of many Levantines. Men do not always look what they are, but the other two might have stepped out of a Hollywood gangster film. Both were small, slim, pale, poker-faced cold-eyed, with tight-fitting over-smart clothes and florid neckties. One wore a felt hat with the brim snapped down in front; the other a peaked yachting cap.

Speaking to Tommy, Biggles said: 'Don't talk to them. Leave this to me.'

Raulstein's dark eyes flashed to him. 'And who might you be?' he inquired.

'You'll find out.'

'Tommy is one of us.'

'He used to be. Not any more.'

'What's it got to do with you?'

'Plenty.'

'You're a cool customer, talking to us that way.'

'Who do you think you are, that I shouldn't?'

Raulstein scowled. 'You'd best mind your own business.'

'This is my business.'

'Who says so?'

'I do.'

'Smart, eh? Well, if you think of standing in for a cut, you'd best think again.'

'There won't be any cuts.' Biggles spoke quietly, almost casually.

Raulstein stared, looking puzzled.

Looking at him, one of the Americans snapped: 'Aw! that's enough yapping. We're wasting time. Let's get on with it. Who are these guys?'

‘You’re likely to waste a lot more time yet,’ Biggles told him.

A thought seemed to strike Raulstein. He looked at Tommy. ‘You bin talking?’

‘I’ve told the police all I know, if that’s what you want to know,’ stated Tommy, boldly, but perhaps stupidly.

Or so it seemed; for a spasm of anger distorted Raulstein’s face and he raised his revolver as if he intended shooting Tommy on the spot. ‘Why, you dirty little rat,’ he rasped furiously. ‘I’ll —’

‘Calling him names, or shooting him, won’t get you anywhere,’ cut in Biggles. ‘As for you’ — he looked at the Americans — ‘I don’t know who you are, but if you’ll take my advice you’ll go back to where you came from, or you may find you’ve bitten off more than you can swallow.’

‘Meanin’ what?’ inquired the one with the yachting cap, eyeing Biggles through narrow slits.

‘Simply this. The police on both sides of the Atlantic know all about the business that brought you here. In Canada they’ve been alerted. Wherever you go you’ll find them waiting for you. Aside from that you must be crazy to suppose Raulstein here would stand you in for a cut even if you found the stuff, which isn’t likely. He’s already knocked off two men to keep them out. Why should you expect anything different?’

‘He’s lying,’ grated Raulstein.

‘What do I have to lie about?’ inquired Biggles coldly.

The American seemed not so sure. ‘You don’t happen to be a cop yourself, by any chance?’

‘You might call me that.’

‘From England?’

‘That’s right.’

‘That’s what I thought, the way you talk. And you brought this kid Tommy here?’

‘He brought us. Comes to the same thing.’

‘So he knows where the stuff is hid?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘Don’t listen to him,’ broke in Raulstein. ‘He’s bluffin’. He’s here for the same reason we are. Tommy knows where the stuff is. He’s coming with us — aren’t you, Tommy? He’ll show us where the stuff is. He’s got his head screwed on right.’

Biggles shrugged and lit a cigarette. ‘I’m not in a position to prevent you from taking him with you by force; but mark my words, if any harm comes to him, I’ll see you pay for it.’

‘So you will, eh! We’ll see about that,’ sneered Raulstein. ‘Come on, Tommy.’ Tommy looked at Biggles appealingly. ‘You’d better go with them,’ advised Biggles, knowing it was bound to come to that in the end. ‘They’ll have more sense than to hurt you, knowing we’re here.’ Tommy got up. ‘Okay, if you say so.’

‘The rest of you slay here,’ warned Raulstein, viciously. ‘Anyone who tries to leave this hut will get what’s coming to him. I’m tellin’ you. Someone will be watching.’ The invaders left the hut, taking Tommy with them. As the door closed behind them, Bertie and Ginger looked at Biggles in surprise, almost with consternation. ‘You let them take him,’ accused Ginger incredulously.

‘What else could I do? To have tried to keep him here would have meant a gun battle, in which case we’d certainly have got the worst of it. Already holding us covered, they would probably have killed all of us once they started. We know Raulstein thinks nothing of murder. Anyway, stuck here as we are, we’re in no case to risk casualties. It seemed to me our best plan was to play for time. Now we can think. They still don’t know we have guns in our pockets.’

‘It seems to me that with Tommy in their hands they’re likely to get away with it,’ Ginger said gloomily.

‘Get away with what? They’re not likely to leave without what they came for and they’re still a long way from getting it.’

‘They’ll force Tommy to show them where he put the stuff.’

‘Okay, so they can start digging — if they have anything to dig with, which I doubt.’

‘Tommy says they surprised him on the landslide. They’ll guess what he was doing there, so they must at least have a rough idea of where the bag must be,’ argued Ginger.

‘Raulstein has no actual proof that Tommy knows where the bag is, or that it was he who hid it. He only assumes. Tommy, even under threats, won’t be able to help them any more than he could help us.’

‘They’ll bump him off out of spite.’

‘Kill the only goose on the island that might be able to lay golden eggs! Not likely. They wouldn’t be so daft as to do that.’

‘When you chaps have finished arguing, how about getting down to brass tacks?’ Bertie said impatiently. ‘Those toughs have got a launch tucked away somewhere. They’re living on it. That’s why they’re no longer using the cabin.’

‘That’s fairly obvious,’ answered Biggles. ‘But while this fog persists, they’re no more able to get away than we are — not without the risk of knocking a hole in their boat. Raulstein, as we know, is no sailor; and neither, I’d bet, are his pals.’

‘What if the fog should lift?’

‘Fraser will be over, flat out.’

‘What if the fog doesn’t lift? Do we just sit here and perish from slow starvation?’

‘What can we do about it?’

‘I can tell you what I’m going to do. I’m not waiting for manna to drop from heaven.’

‘Go ahead.’

'We're agreed these stiffies must have a boat?'

'I don't suppose they swam here.'

'If there's a boat there must be grub on board. Right?'

'So it's reasonable to suppose.'

'Well then. What are we waiting for? If you see what I mean.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm going to find the bally boat and give my teeth something to bite on. If you boys behave yourselves I'll bring you a bite of something to go on with.'

'You'll have a job to find the boat.'

'I'll find it. I've always been good at finding boats. I can smell 'em a mile off.'

'Haven't you forgotten something?'

'Such as?'

'Raulstein said he was posting a guard to knock off anyone who tried to leave the cabin.'

'He was talking through his trilby. All codswallop. I can't see any of that bunch squatting all day on wet ground waiting for our front door to open.'

'Even if you're right, you're likely to have a long walk in front of you.'

'My legs are still working.'

'And having found the boat, what if the gang is on board?'

'Leave it to me, chum. If I know anything, they'll be clawing into that landslide like rabbits with a dog on their tails.'

'Fair enough, if that's how you feel. Carry on.'

'And I've got another idea,' declared Bertie, polishing his eyeglass vigorously. 'I don't know what's come over me, but I'm fairly bristling with ideas. Must be something to do with the atmosphere.'

'What's the latest brainwave?'

'When I go out, if anyone is watching you'll hear guns go off.'

'So?'

'If there's no shooting, you blokes sitting here toasting your tootsies will know the coast is clear.'

'And then?'

'Well, there'd be no reason why Ginger shouldn't totter down to the landing ground and be on the spot ready to meet Fraser when the fog packs up. Someone ought to be there to give him the gen about what goes on here.'

'Any reason why I shouldn't go?' inquired Biggles.

'Yes. Tommy might make a break. If he does he'll come here. If he arrived and found the cabin abandoned, he'd think we'd pushed off and left him to his fate — and all that sort of rot, if you get my meaning.'

Biggles smiled wanly. 'As you say, dear boy, the old brain pan must have put in some overtime. Fair enough. See what you can do. I must admit it's pretty grim sitting here with nothing better to do than twiddle our thumbs.'

'Then you don't mind if I do a little foraging? After all, I've nothing to lose.'

‘Only your life — if you reckon that nothing.’

‘Don’t be so depressing. Believe you me, old boy, I shall hang on to my life like grim death. I’ll be back.’

So saying, Bertie took out his automatic pistol, examined it, and with it in his hand walked to the door. Very quietly he opened it a little way, letting in a trickle of fog. For a moment he stood silhouetted against an opaque background. Then he moved forward and closed the door behind him.

‘There, I’m afraid, goes poor old Bertie,’ Ginger said in a melancholy voice.

Biggles did not answer.

They listened for the expected gunshots.

None came.

Ginger breathed again.

CHAPTER 11

BERTIE TAKES A WALK

WHEN Bertie left the cabin he did so silently and slowly, but ready to move swiftly should Raulstein's threat materialize. He did not think it would, if for no other reason than a man guarding the door would have to stand right up against it to serve his purpose, so dense was the fog. Visibility might have been five yards, not more. Apart from that, as Bertie had said, he could not imagine any member of the gang spending the day just standing there in the chilly fog. By peering, straining his eyes, Bertie could see no more than an indistinct grey blur that had no outline, but which he knew was the edge of the wood.

There was no movement. No sound. The island seemed to have been choked to death by the pall of vapour that had enveloped it. He sidestepped quickly a single pace in order not to present a stationary target to anyone who might be there; then he stopped again to stare and listen. If anyone was there he gave no indication of his presence. Still, it was a tense, anxious moment, and Bertie held his pistol at the ready, prepared to use it at the first sign of danger. He continued to move, a step at a time, along the side of the cabin to get to the rear. There could, he thought, be no purpose in anyone waiting there.

Reaching this, his immediate objective, he breathed more freely. So he had been right. No one had been left on guard. He was relieved, but not surprised. Once split up the gang would find it difficult to get in touch again, at all events without calling or otherwise making a noise. There was, he suspected, another reason why the two Americans would prefer to keep close to Raulstein. They did not trust him. Why should they? How could they? Bertie had noticed the expression that had passed over the face of one of them when Biggles had made the remark to the effect that they would be stupid to suppose Raulstein would share the swag with them even if they found it... he had already murdered two men, so why should they not get the same treatment? It was the sort of behaviour the Americans, being armed crooks themselves, would understand. Bertie was sure that the seed of mistrust which Biggles had sown had fallen on fertile ground, as was of course intended.

He now moved with more confidence, although that is not to say carelessly. Arriving at the far end of the cabin, along the back, he again paused to listen. Satisfied that all was well, he passed on quickly to the fringe of the trees. Reaching the nearest, he stopped again, taking up a position to watch; to make certain he had not been followed. Nothing happened. Feeling more comfortable now he was out of the danger zone, he put the gun in his pocket and prepared for the task he had set himself. It would, he thought, be more difficult than dangerous; but he would still have to be careful, relying

more on his ears than his eyes to keep clear of the edge of the cliff and the sea below.

He was handicapped by not knowing the coastline, or, indeed, anything at all about the island except the open part in the middle where Fraser had landed. He expected to find that the fierce Atlantic storms had bitten deeply into the land, as had happened on the mainland. There were bound to be coves and creeks of varying extent, and in one of them, if his surmise was correct, the launch that had brought Raulstein and his accomplices to the island would be moored. It was not likely to be on the open sea, exposed to the weather.

What exactly he intended to do should he locate the launch he still did not know. As he had said, that would depend on the circumstances. A crew might have been left on board. The entire gang might have returned to it to wait for the weather conditions to improve. But it was more likely, he thought, that with Tommy in their custody, and aware that they were not alone on the island, they would make every possible effort to secure the bag of jewels without wasting a minute.

By listening intently, Bertie could just make out the murmur of the waves on the desolate shore. It was only a murmur, a gentle purr, indicating that the sea was dead calm, as was to be expected since there was hardly a breath of breeze. Had there been any wind, there would have been no fog. The lapping of the waves was his only guide; and he moved on towards it, taking a direction away from the landslide to avoid any possible collision with the enemy.

Careful though he was, he nearly came to grief at the outset. A dark, irregular mark lay across his path. He took it to be an outcrop of the black rock of which the island was largely composed. Although he approached it cautiously, it was not until he felt the ground slipping under his feet that he realized his mistake; that the stain was in fact a narrow crack in the cliff, an inlet of the sea. Having scrambled back to a safe position, more than somewhat startled, he stared, listening. From far below came the sound of water, surging and gushing. This was the shore. The shock served as a warning of what a careless step might mean.

Having rounded the trap, continuing on his way he encountered similar obstructions. He could not see the water, but he could hear it. This made progress slow, and he began to feel a little despondent, wondering how he was to find the launch even if it was there. It seemed hardly worth while going on, and he sat on a rock to give the project further consideration.

And it was as he sat there, thinking seriously of abandoning the search, wiping condensation from his monocle, that something happened to give him renewed hope. It was not much. No more than a slight pressure of air on his face. A breeze. It was just strong enough to tear the fog into long, streaming shreds, like rags of butter muslin. Once for a brief moment he caught a glimpse of the sea. Delighted, he waited. In a few minutes, the breeze freshening, on and off, visibility had increased to about fifty yards. This was

not constant. The fog still hung in great opaque clouds, but it moved. There were gaps. It was no longer the motionless mass it had been earlier.

In these changing conditions he had to give some thought to a return to the cabin forthwith, in case Biggles was anxious to move, possibly to the landing ground in anticipation of Fraser coming over. After some reflection he decided to carry on, telling himself that should the fog clear altogether, he would be able to make fast time back to the cabin, for although he had been out for some time, he knew he had covered no great distance. So he went on, through fog now varying in density. During the intervals when it was thin he could see the sea, and was able to hurry. Once for a few seconds there was even a blink of sun. It was quickly extinguished; but he now felt it was only a question of time before the battle of sun and breeze against the fog would end in the latter either being burnt up or blown away. So it was in a more optimistic frame of mind that he resumed his quest.

It ended about half an hour later, in weather conditions that had slowly but steadily improved. He was brought to a halt by the sound of blows, as of metal on metal. Going to the edge of the cliff on all fours he looked over. A hundred feet below, in a tiny cove, moored to a flat slab of rock which formed a ready-made landing-stage, was the launch. Or at any rate, a launch; and he was sure it could only be the one he sought. A man was on the deck. One man; hammering at something, although just what he was doing was not apparent. He wore overalls and appeared to be coloured. In fact, a Negro. Bertie didn't mind what colour he was. He was only concerned with finding the way down. Obviously, as Raulstein and his companions had come up, there had to be a way.

A close study of the sides of the cove revealed a sloping bank; a fall of loose rock; across it he could just discern a zigzag mark which he thought could only be a track; a narrow path. Elsewhere the sides of the cove were almost precipitous, unclimbable except at considerable risk. He made his way towards it, taking no pains to conceal himself, knowing the deck-hand would be bound to see him, or hear him, as he went down the track. At the moment the man was too busy at what he was doing to look up.

Bertie advanced through fog which, while thick in patches, was now definitely less dense than it had been earlier. This, he thought, was more due to the breeze than the sun, which was now on its way down for the night. He kept an eye on the boat in case the man on deck should be joined by another, or others who might have been left on board. A disadvantage lay in not knowing the size of the crew, but he felt confident that the gang had not returned.

Curiously enough, perhaps because the man on deck was making so much noise himself, and Bertie did not care if he was seen, he actually reached the little natural quay to which the launch was tied up without being noticed. In fact, he had to speak to the Negro, a big powerfully built fellow, to call attention to himself. This he did because he had resolved not to use force if it

could be avoided. A ruse might better serve his purpose. He had thought of one on his way down, and this he now put to the test.

‘Hi, there!’ he hailed. ‘Are you Mr Raulstein’s man?’

With a start of surprise the Negro looked round from what he was doing. After regarding Bertie for a second or two without animosity, he replied, ‘Howdy. Sure. We got Mr Raulstein with us. Why?’

‘Is he on board?’

‘No, mister. He’s gone ashore with the boss.’

‘You mean the one with the captain’s cap?’

‘That’s right. Mr Read.’

‘Mr Read owns the boat?’

‘Sure does. What’s the trouble?’

‘I’ve brought a message from him. He wants you to join him right away. You’ll find him a mile or two along the coast.’ Bertie pointed the direction.

‘What’s he want me for, mister? Does he say?’

‘I think he’s got a digging job on hand, so if you’ve got a pick and shovel you’d better take them with you. Is anyone else on board?’

‘No. Only me. I’m the cook.’

The man appeared to find nothing remarkable in all this. Actually there was no reason why he should. At all events he did not question it. ‘I get it,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Thanks, mister.’ He went below, presently to return with a spade and a crow-bar.

‘You go on,’ advised Bertie. ‘You’ll travel faster than me. It’s easy now the fog’s cleared a bit. I’ll be along presently.’

‘Like you say, mister. Thanks for bringing the message.’ Shouldering the tools, the ingenuous Negro stepped ashore and without any more questions set off up the track as fast as he could go.

Bertie, well satisfied, watched him. To get rid of the man had been easy. Easier than he had dared to hope. Yet, after all, he pondered, there was no reason why the man should disbelieve him. The message would sound genuine. Why should he doubt it? He waited until the victim of his trick had faded into the mist that still clung to the top of the cliff, and then lost no time in setting about the purpose that had brought him to the spot. He went below.

It did not take him long to find the galley. There, as he had anticipated, were the provisions for the cruise. Plenty of them; mostly, of course, in cans. Half a side of bacon hung on a hook. On a slab was some meat cut up ready for the pot. Beside it lay a string of onions. Looking about for a receptacle, he found on the floor a sack half full of potatoes. He tipped them out. Working fast, for with daylight fading there was a risk of Raulstein and Co. returning, he filled the sack to make a comfortable load and prepared to depart forthwith.

He hesitated as a thought occurred to him, one that had not been in his programme. Actually, as he was taking a last look round, a large can of paraffin standing on the floor may have been the source of his inspiration. The launch was in his hands. This was never likely to happen again, so why not

make the most of it? Why leave the crooks free to leave the island when it suited them? Perhaps taking Tommy with them. And the jewels, if they had forced him to divulge their whereabouts. Once they had secured what they had come for, they would not stay a minute longer than was necessary.

All this flashed through Bertie's mind in a moment of time. He perceived it was now in his power to prevent anything like that happening. By putting the launch out of action. How? By sinking it? Even if he could find the sea-cock, that would take time. Why not destroy the launch completely? That would hold the crooks prisoner on the island until Fraser could make arrangements for their arrest. Fire could be the answer. The means were at hand.

He emptied the paraffin on the floor. Into the puddle he threw some dirty dish-cloths. A match did the rest. With flames spreading, he picked up his sack and hurrying to the deck jumped ashore. He did not linger, but went up the cliff track faster than he had come down it. Only once did he pause to look back, to see the launch already enveloped in oily black smoke. He wondered from what distance it would be seen. Not far, he decided, unless the fog dispersed completely.

Reaching the top of the cliff, he set off for home; that is, the cabin. There was still a certain amount of fog hanging about, more than there had been at sea level; but it was patchy. For this he had reason to be thankful, or he might have found himself in trouble. He had covered less than half the distance to the cabin when he heard voices coming from the fog in front of him. As there was only one party on the island to do any talking, he dived into the nearest trees and lay still.

From this safe hiding-place it was with almost malicious satisfaction that he saw Raulstein and the rest of his gang hurry past in a sort of panic. He would have derived more pleasure from the spectacle had Tommy not been with them. But he was, held by the arm by the Negro cook, who must have dumped his tools somewhere, for he no longer carried them. So Tommy had not been able to get away, Bertie reflected sadly as he picked up his sack and continued on his way. But still, he consoled himself, he had done what he had set out to do, and it would be unreasonable to expect everything to go in his favour.

Before reaching the cabin, his self-congratulations on the success of his exploit suffered a jolt when he heard voices behind him, drawing closer as if the speakers were travelling fast. It was not difficult to guess what had happened. The gang had reached the launch and had seen what had happened to it. Learning from the Negro of his visit, they were now in pursuit, probably hoping to overtake him before he could get back to the cabin, to which they would assume he would return.

Handicapped by the burden of his sack, no light weight, yet loth to abandon it or even lose sight of it, but realizing he was likely to be overtaken, he again sought refuge under the gloomy trees that crowded on the inland side of the cliff. There, sheltered by the leafy screen provided by the drooping,

moisture-laden branches, he sat to watch events.

Presently a little procession of three men emerged from the fog to hasten past. It comprised Raulstein and the two Americans. They had their guns in their hands, and from the expressions on their faces they were in an ugly mood. Bertie knew why. But where they were going in such a hurry he could only guess. He began to wonder if burning the launch had been a wise move. However, nothing could be done about that now. What worried him even more was fear of what might have happened to Tommy. Neither he nor the Negro had been in the pursuing party. What had they done with him? Raulstein would not stop short of another murder if it suited him. It was a nasty thought.

Picking up his sack Bertie moved on, slowly now and with the extreme caution called for by the circumstances. Somewhere in front of him was the enemy. Of that there could be no doubt, or he must have encountered them, except in the unlikely event of their having gone into the forest; and he could think of no reason why they should do that. The fog, while not as dense as it had been, still hung over the island like a canopy, making aviation impossible; so Raulstein would not have gone to the landing ground, should he know anything about the helicopter and have an idea of intercepting it.

Where had he been making for? Bertie could only guess. There appeared to be only two possibilities. The cabin, or possibly the landslide, to renew the search for the canvas bag and the treasure it contained. The tools carried by the Negro must have been left there, or somewhere handy, for they had not been with the party on its return to the launch.

Still exercising his brain in an effort to weigh up the situation, Bertie continued to advance until he was within a hundred yards of the cabin. A new thought occurred to him. His entry into the cabin, should the gang be there, would be the signal for a show-down. He had no intention of leaving Biggles to face three angry conspirators, perhaps single-handed. In an affray, the sack of provisions would be in the way. A nuisance. If things went badly he might have to abandon it, and having been to so much trouble to get it he hated the thought of losing it. The food was badly needed, and with the launch gone there was no possibility of getting more.

He decided something would have to be done about this.

A solution was not hard to find. Obviously the thing was to put it somewhere out of the way yet recoverable when the fuss was over. Moving a little way into the trees, he dragged a hole with the side of his shoe in the thick soft layer of dead pine needles. Into the cavity he dropped the sack, covered it, and topped up the little heap with some clumps of moss to make the hump look natural.

This problem solved, he was about to move on when he was startled by a low hiss as if someone was blowing through his teeth. He could see no one. His first thought, of course, was that it might be Ginger, who had left the cabin as he had suggested to watch the landing ground. Taking no chances he

backed a pace, feeling for his gun should it be needed. A rustle in some bushes close in front of him took his eyes to the spot. The bushes shook. They parted. A man emerged. It was not Ginger. He didn't know who it was. It was a man, a tall, gaunt, haggard, bearded creature he had never seen before. A dirty, blood-stained rag, hung over his forehead. In filthy ragged clothes he might have been the lowest kind of tramp.

The scarecrow laid a finger on his lips. 'Don't shoot,' he said tersely. 'You must be Ginger's pal, Bertie.' He came forward.

'And who the devil are you?' demanded Bertie. 'What do you know about Ginger? Where is he?'

'Watching the cabin,' was the answer. 'He asked me to wait here for you and stop you if I saw you.'

CHAPTER 12

BIGGLES FACES THE MUSIC

ON Bertie's departure from the cabin, closing the door softly behind him, Biggles and Ginger had sat silent, tense, expectant, prepared for the gunshot that would announce Raulstein's threat had not been an idle one, and that someone had been left on guard. No shot came. No sound at all. When the silence had lasted for perhaps two minutes Ginger relaxed.

'He's done it,' he said softly. 'He's got clear.'

Biggles nodded. 'So it seems. He was right. Raulstein tried a bluff to keep us shut up here without splitting his party. What good Bertie hopes to do in this diabolic fog I can't imagine. We shall see.'

No more was said. Time passed; an hour or more. No sound came from outside. Once in a while Ginger got up and, going quietly to the door, opened it a few inches to examine the weather. On the last of these occasions he said he thought the fog was beginning to lift a little.

'I can't see what good it'll do us,' returned Biggles. 'We can't leave here even if we had a reason. We shall have to wait for Bertie to come back. Whatever he gets up to he's bound to return here when he's finished, and if he found no one here he wouldn't know what to do.'

'We could leave a written message saying what we were doing.'

'How could we do that without a clue as to what we intended to do? Once outside anything could happen. Besides, Raulstein might come back. He'd find the message. It would be daft to tell him what we were going to do — or try to do — even if we knew ourselves. No, that doesn't sound a good idea to me.'

More time passed. Again Ginger inspected the weather. 'The fog is definitely thinner than it was,' he reported. 'I can't see why we should both stay here.'

'And I can't see what good we could do if we went out.'

'I was thinking of what Bertie said about me going to the landing ground. The fog might lift as suddenly as it came down. If it did Fraser would certainly whistle over. Unless he was warned of what was going on here, he might bump into Raulstein and get the worst of the argument. Worse still, Raulstein might find the chopper with no one in it and decide to put it out of action. He'd hear it come over. If he sabotaged it we should all be up the creek without a paddle.'

'What are you suggesting?' inquired Biggles.

'I'm pretty sure I could find the landing ground. It seems to me that it would be a good idea if I went along to be on the spot should Fraser slip over. If he didn't show up I could always come back here and no harm would be done. It'll be getting dark in a couple of hours anyway.'

‘All right, if that’s how you feel,’ consented Biggles. ‘I don’t see what harm you could do as long as you don’t get lost. But be careful what you get up to. For goodness’ sake keep well clear of Raulstein. If you bumped into him alone you wouldn’t have a hope.’

‘I’ll watch that doesn’t happen, you may be sure,’ declared Ginger.

‘I shall stay here.’

‘Okay. See you later. Fog or no fog, I shall come back as soon as it starts to get dark. Fraser’s not likely to do any night-flying in this sort of country.’

Ginger went to the door, opened it a few inches, looked, listened, and went out, closing it quietly behind him.

Biggles, left alone, sat still for some time, brooding over the situation. Only once did he move and that was to stoke up the fire to make the place seem a little more cheerful. He was not happy about the way the case had developed. In fact he was depressed, feeling that he had handled things badly, chiefly by failing to make allowances for the possible return of Raulstein to the island. That was not entirely unexpected; what was outside his calculations was that he might turn up supported by two armed thugs, professional gunmen, for that obviously was what the Americans were.

He was not particularly worried about Bertie, although he had been away a long time; or Ginger, for that matter. They should be able to take care of themselves. But with wretched Tommy it was a different matter; he was in the hands of men who might murder him, and would, without hesitation, if it suited their purpose. He was beginning to regret, and reproach himself, for letting him go without making a more determined effort to keep him; but at the time it seemed the only thing to do.

So Biggles sat, pondering, until the square patch of light from the only window in the cabin began to dim, indicating the approach of nightfall. He was still not worried about the others, but he was getting a little concerned, even anxious. They should, he thought, be back by now.

For a moment a clatter of empty cans outside suggested that one of them had arrived; but he did not entertain the thought because he could not imagine either Bertie or Ginger being so careless as to make such a noise — unless there was an urgent need for haste. He was prepared for bad news, but not for what happened next.

The door was burst open and Raulstein, gun in hand, crashed into the room, the two Americans on his heels. ‘Where is he?’ he snarled, glaring at Biggles.

Biggles did not move. ‘Are you looking for somebody?’ he asked evenly.

‘We want that daft-looking Limey with a window in his face,’ rapped out one of the Americans, the one who wore the yachting cap.

‘Oh! What’s he done?’ inquired Biggles, casually.

‘Done! He’s set fire to my boat, blast his eyes.’

Not without difficulty Biggles restrained a smile. Apparently Bertie had been busy. ‘What boat?’ he asked innocently. ‘I didn’t know you had a boat.’

‘How the hell do you think we got here?’

‘I wouldn’t know. I’m not clairvoyant.’

‘Where is he?’

‘He isn’t here. I’d have thought you could have seen that for yourself.

There isn’t much room for anyone to hide, is there?’

The three men looked at each other, nonplussed, possibly taken aback by Biggles’ attitude of unconcern.

‘In the meantime, what have you done with young Tommy?’ went on Biggles calmly, not seriously expecting an answer.

‘He’s all right,’ growled Raulstein, whatever that may have meant.

‘I hope for your sake he is,’ stated Biggles, with an edge on his voice.

‘Don’t you tell me what I can do,’ flared Raulstein.

‘You might put the wood in the hole to keep the fog where it belongs,’ suggested Biggles.

Raulstein slammed the door, which had been left open.

‘Thank you,’ acknowledged Biggles, with exaggerated courtesy. ‘Now, what were you saying?’

‘Who does this guy think he is?’ rasped the American who had previously spoken. ‘What’s going to happen about my boat?’

‘I’m afraid that’s your affair,’ returned Biggles, unruffled. ‘It looks as if you’ll have to get another, doesn’t it?’

‘Like hell it does! Are you going to pay for it?’

‘I most certainly am not. I don’t carry that sort of money, anyway. Whether you know it or not, this island is private property and you’ve no right to be here.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ sneered Raulstein.

‘You won’t have much say in the matter when the Canadian police get here,’ promised Biggles. ‘And if that’s all you have to say,’ he added, ‘you might find yourselves another lodging.’

‘Are you telling us where we can go?’

‘No, because, frankly, I wouldn’t know where to suggest. I’m merely giving you a spot of advice, which is to get weaving while the going’s good. Apart from that I don’t like you, and I find this conversation tiresome.’

The other American spoke. ‘How do we get anywhere without a boat?’

‘I’m afraid that’s your problem, although if you stay here long enough no doubt the Canadian police will provide you with transport. Think it over.’

The three men looked at each other.

It must be admitted that Biggles was only talking to gain time, to give himself an opportunity to think; apart from which he could see no way out of the present contretemps. He was afraid it could only end in violence in which he would be at a disadvantage. He gathered from the conversation that Bertie had found the launch and set fire to it, although his reason for doing this could only be conjectured. Knowing nothing about the Negro deckhand, he could only wonder what had become of Tommy. Could he have escaped? He felt

certain the crooks had not yet found the jewels, or they would not be standing there wasting time in futile conversation. Not that they could get away without a boat of some sort. From the way they were behaving there was reason to think that they themselves were at a loss to know what to do next. Naturally, they would be reluctant to leave the island without getting what they had come for; but it could be they were now wondering what to do with the jewels if they did get their hands on them. They would not solve their present problem of how to get to the mainland. So reasoned Biggles.

But perhaps the most urgent question, and the one uppermost in his mind at this critical juncture, was what would happen if Bertie walked in; for this might happen at any moment. The crooks appeared to know it was he, and not Ginger, who had been responsible for the sabotaging of their boat. The arrival of Ginger on the scene might not therefore spark off the explosion that seemed imminent. But should Bertie join the party the balloon would almost certainly go up with a bang; and he braced himself for it.

Raulstein broke in on his thoughts. 'I reckon we'll stay here,' he said.

Biggles shrugged. If this was their decision there was little he could do about it. He was in no position to force them to leave. He was not surprised. In fact, he had expected this would be the outcome. With no boat, and nowhere else on the island to find shelter for the night, what else could they do? The move was predictable. The explosion of violence, sooner or later, was now inevitable. Bertie, without a doubt, would return to the cabin and that would be it.

'I'll not pretend you're welcome, but I hope you won't find it too uncomfortable,' he said with frosty sarcasm. 'I'm sorry I can't offer you any hospitality, but someone appears to have emptied the larder.'

'That wasn't us,' declared Raulstein. 'We were here, but we didn't need *all* the grub. We had plenty of our own, on the boat.'

Biggles was genuinely surprised by this statement because if it were not true he could see no reason for it. 'If it wasn't you who left the litter of cans outside, who was it?'

'How would I know? Some of 'em were ours. We came here once or twice to eat. Brought ours with us.'

'What does it matter?' returned Biggles. 'The problem of food may not arise as far as you're concerned. To the best of my knowledge the Mounties are not in the habit of starving their prisoners.'

Nobody answered. Perhaps nobody could think of anything to say; or thought the point Biggles had made not worth arguing about. The Americans pocketed their guns, and after a brief hesitation Raulstein did the same. 'Don't you try anything,' he warned, glaring at Biggles.

'What is there to try?' answered Biggles disarmingly. 'I'm not frantic to spend a night out in this perishing fog.' The words came automatically, for his muscles were taut. His eyes were looking past Raulstein at the door. Had he imagined it, or had it slowly opened an inch?

He watched, nerves tingling. The door opened another inch. Who was it?
Bertie or Ginger? Or possibly Tommy?

Breathless, he waited.

CHAPTER 13

GINGER GETS A FRIGHT

GINGER had made the same cautious departure from the cabin as Bertie had done before him. As he now had reason to expect, nothing happened, and he proceeded on what in his heart he felt was a useless mission. Should the fog persist, there was no chance of the helicopter coming over; but there was always a possibility that it might clear suddenly, as occasionally fog will. Anyway, it was better to be doing something than killing time in the cabin.

He had no great difficulty in finding his way, at all events while he was in the wood. All he had to do was move downhill and he could not fail to arrive at his destination; the open ground in the middle of the island. It didn't matter particularly where he struck it. Should the fog lift he would be able to see, or hear, the aircraft, should it arrive. It was, he thought, as simple as that. On his way down through the trees he dragged his feet in the soft leaf mould to leave a track that would guide him on his return to the cabin. This, he had decided, would be as soon as darkness began to close in. There would be no object in waiting after that.

To his disappointment, as he went downhill to the lower ground the fog became worse instead of better; but that, he realized, was to be expected. The moisture-laden atmosphere was certain to hang in the central basin.

When in due course he reached his objective, seeing nothing more interesting than a prowling fox, he was brought to a halt by an almost solid wall of fog. It was obviously futile to go any farther. It might be dangerous in that he would be practically certain to lose his bearings. He had had enough experience of fogs to be only too well aware of that. He had no wish to find himself up to the neck in a bog. There was nothing else for it than to remain where he was, and that being so he thought he might as well sit down. Which he did, half regretting he had left the comparative comfort of the cabin with its log fire, to serve, as now seemed probable, no useful purpose.

Some time dragged past. He did not doze, he was too uncomfortable for that; but convinced that he had nothing to fear, he fell to thinking about the situation that had developed, and with nothing whatever to distract his attention he may have sunk into the kind of stupor such conditions tend to produce. He could see nothing. The silence was absolute.

His awakening to reality was a rude one. It came when, without warning, hands closed round his neck and throat, choking him and forcing him down on his back. From this position he found himself staring up into a face so horrible that fear became the horror of a nightmare; a pale, thin, haggard face, with a tangle of matted beard, from which, under a mop of unkempt hair topped by a piece of blood-stained rag, two eyes ablaze with hate glared into his own. There was no sound apart from his own frenzied gasping.

It is hardly necessary to say that he struggled. He fought as if he had suddenly found himself in the grip of a madman — as indeed he thought he had. He kicked, he squirmed, he tore at the fingers that met round his neck threatening to choke the life out of him. Fighting with the fury of despair, he managed to raise a foot to the man's stomach; then he straightened his leg in a kick into which he put every ounce of his failing strength. It worked. The grip on his throat was broken. His assailant somersaulted over him and sprawled down the bank.

Before he could get up to renew the attack, Ginger, still half dazed by the shock of it all, had struggled to his feet, his gun in hand. And he was prepared to use it, too. In fact, he nearly did use it; and would have done so had not the man, seeing the gun pointing at him at a range of a few feet, remained still, panting, staring.

Ginger was panting, too, for that matter. 'What the devil do you think you're doing?' he rapped out with iron in his voice. 'One step and I'll put a hole through you.'

For perhaps five seconds the two stood glaring at each other, breathing heavily, neither speaking nor moving. Then it was the stranger who spoke first. 'Who are you?' he said.

'What's that got to do with you?' snapped back Ginger. 'Are you out of your mind?'

'What are you doing here?'

'That's my business.'

'It's mine, too.'

'How do you work that out?'

'I happen to be the owner of this island.'

'You own...' Ginger's eyes sauced as the only possible meaning of the words penetrated his still-reeling brain. 'What's your name?' he managed to get out.

'Campbell.'

'Angus Campbell?'

'That's right.'

'For heaven's sake!' Ginger exclaimed weakly. 'I'd forgotten about you.' He forced a smile as, putting the gun back in his pocket, he went on: 'I thought you must be a lunatic Crusoe.'

'That's just about what I am.'

'Well, there was no need to set about me. I may turn out to be your man Friday. I and some friends of mine are here to help you.' This of course was not strictly true, but to Ginger at that moment it seemed near enough.

'I'm sorry.'

'So you should be,' Ginger growled, straightening his collar and tie and fast coming back to normal. 'Who did you think I was?'

'One of a gang of villains who have taken possession of my property.'

'I know all about them. You know you're supposed to be dead?'

'So, but for luck I should be. A scoundrel named Raulstein tried to murder me.'

'Murder is his line. Have we finished fighting?'

'Sure.'

'Good. Apart from choking me you nearly frightened me to death. It might be a good thing if we had a chat to get things straightened out.'

'Okay. I was about ready to strangle anyone when I saw you. I was hoping to find Raulstein, the skunk. After all I'd done for him, he coshed me from behind and threw me off my boat into the sea. Must have been the shock of the cold water that brought me round. Being a strong swimmer I managed to get ashore. Raulstein saw me and fired at me with the gun he carries. I had to hide up in the woods.'

'And you've been here ever since?'

'Couldn't get away. Raulstein had my boat moored in a cove, but I daren't go near it for fear of being shot.'

'How have you managed for food?'

'Not too bad. I grabbed some from my cabin when Raulstein was out of the way searching for something. With that, and shellfish off the rocks, I've made do.'

'Why didn't you make a smoke signal to let people in Rankinton know where you were?'

'I'd no means of lighting a fire. Everything was soaking wet, like it is now. I had matches in my pocket, but they'd been in the sea and I couldn't get 'em dry.'

'So you've been living rough ever since you came ashore.'

'Look at me. How do you think I got in this state?'

'So having once rescued Raulstein you brought him back here?'

'Aye.'

'Did he tell you why he wanted to come back?'

'Aye. He told me he'd lost his old mother's last present to him. A gold watch. He thought he knew where he must have dropped it.'

'And you believed him?'

'At the time I had no reason to disbelieve him.'

Ginger spoke slowly. 'What he was looking for was a quarter of a million pounds' worth of jewellery which he'd stolen in London. It had been hidden on the island, stuffed down a foxhole.'

Campbell stared. 'So *that* was it! The liar. Now it all begins to add up. Is this stuff still here?'

'As far as we know.'

'Who do you mean by *we*?'

'Police officers from London. Three of us. There's another man in the party. When you first picked up Raulstein here he had a lad with him.'

'Boy called Tommy?'

'That's right.'

‘Nice lad. I’ve often wondered why he ran away from me in Rankinton.’

‘He wasn’t running away from you. He was trying to get clear of Raulstein, not without reason. He was afraid of being murdered.’

‘*Murdered!* Why?’

‘Because it was he who’d hidden the jewellery. He got back to England and told us the whole story. He’s here with us to recover the stolen property. Or he was. I say was because Raulstein grabbed him this morning and is holding him; but he’s not likely to murder him.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because he’s the only man alive who can say where the stuff is.’

‘Gosh! What a tale. Do you know this guy Raulstein?’

‘I’ve met him.’

‘So he’s still here?’

‘Too true. We had a set-to earlier in the day. That’s why I’m here, watching for Jack Fraser to come over should the fog clear. He won’t come in these conditions, that’s for sure. But we might as well sit down.’

They sat together on the soaking ground.

‘Are you going to join us, or do you prefer to work on your own?’ inquired Ginger.

‘Join you, of course. Where’s the rest of your party?’

‘Inspector Bigglesworth, my chief, is standing by in the cabin in case Tommy makes a break. Bertie Lissie, my half-section, went out to look for Raulstein’s launch hoping to get some food. We brought none with us expecting to go straight back to Rankinton; but the fog came down and we’re stuck here.’

‘I doubt if your chum is likely to get any food even if he locates Raulstein’s boat in this murk.’

‘Why not?’

‘There’s a big Negro left on board.’

‘The deuce there is!’

‘Bertie won’t get much change out of him.’

‘You’d be surprised. You don’t know Bertie.’

‘What do you reckon to do next?’

‘That’s something my chief will decide.’ Ginger went on to fill in any gaps in his story. ‘Now, what happened to you?’ he concluded.

‘There doesn’t seem to be much you don’t know,’ rejoined Campbell. ‘You know how I first picked up Raulstein and Tommy from the island, so we needn’t go over that again. I put them up in my house at Rankinton. Tommy stayed only one night, then he vanished. I understand now why Raulstein was so upset about it. He spent a day or two looking for him. Then I had to tell him that as I had to go away on business, I couldn’t do with him any longer. I suggested he went to the Blue Dolphin, Charley Murray’s place. Which he did. As he said he was broke, I gave him some money to tide him over. Then he came back and told me the tale about losing his gold watch. That explained

the rumour I'd heard about him trying to make arrangements to go back to the island. He asked me if as a special favour I'd run him across. This was the evening before I was due to leave early the following morning, so it was inconvenient. However, I try to help fellers down on their luck, so I agreed to take him; but it would mean starting before daylight and I wouldn't be able to wait for more than an hour almost. He said a few minutes should be enough. So I brought him here. We started an hour before dawn.'

'I imagine that was why no one in Rankinton seemed to know anything about it,' put in Ginger.

'I suppose so. There's no one about at that time.'

'Raulstein must have planned what he intended to do when you got here.'

'Of course. That's obvious now. He wanted to stay on the island, but he couldn't without a boat; so he decided to steal mine. Which he did. I've told you how.'

'He must have stayed here for a while. Then, failing to find the jewels, he pushed off to fetch help.'

'That's it. I didn't see him go. I was hiding in the woods, feeling pretty sick from having been bashed on the head. I didn't know where he'd hidden my boat, so I couldn't get away. If I had known where it was I wouldn't have dared to go near it for fear of being shot. It would have suited him to silence me for good. I did my best to watch him, but it wasn't easy in a place like this. It was during one of his trips, to look for the jewels I suppose, that I slipped into the cabin and collected a load of food. I had to eat. Meanwhile I went on looking for my boat, not realizing he'd gone off in it. The devil knew I couldn't get away. The next thing I knew was when a strange launch turned up. It brought Raulstein and his pals.'

'What happened to your boat?'

'I've no idea. He must have left it somewhere down the coast; maybe sold it. Your guess is as good as mine.'

'Didn't you see the helicopter come over this morning?'

'Yes. From a distance. Unfortunately I was at the far end of the island. Before I could get along it had gone. I couldn't imagine what it was doing.'

'What's happening about your foxes?'

'I don't know. No doubt they'll manage to live somehow. I've been more concerned with how I was going to keep alive.'

Ginger nodded. 'I can understand that.' He looked up at the fog. It was turning grey with the approach of twilight. 'I think it's time we were moving,' he said, getting up. 'It's no use waiting here any longer.'

'What are you going to do?' asked Campbell, also rising.

'I shall go back to the cabin to find out what's happening there. It's the only thing I can do. Anything might have happened while I've been away, so I shall have to do a bit of scouting before I show myself.'

'Okay. I'll come with you.'

They set off up the slope, Ginger back-tracking his own foot-marks. Just

before they came to within sight of the cabin he said: 'Bertie might be back. Perhaps not.' He pointed. 'He'd go that way to keep clear of Raulstein's lot. No doubt he'll come back the same way. While I have a scout round the cabin, I think it'd be a good idea if you waited here to catch him, should he come, and tell him who you are. If he's already back at the cabin I'll let you know. If he isn't, I'll tell my chief I've met you and then come along to fetch you, anyway.'

'Right you are.'

'You'd better keep under cover. You don't want to get in a mix-up with Raulstein. There are three of 'em and they've all got guns, so you'd better keep clear. Without a weapon you wouldn't be able to do anything.'

'Don't worry about me. I'll fix myself a club. I've got my hunting knife. I never come here without it. Good thing too; I don't know how I'd have managed without it.'

'Well, don't go looking for trouble, that's all.'

'If he shoots me now, at least you'll know about it,' returned Campbell cheerfully.

Ginger smiled dubiously and went on towards the cabin.

CHAPTER 14

CAMPBELL CALLS THE TUNE

WE left Bertie gazing in astonishment, and not without some slight alarm, at the extraordinary apparition that had appeared from the bushes to confront him. He didn't know what to make of it, which is hardly surprising; the stranger was certainly not one of Raulstein's gang. He screwed his eyeglass a little more firmly in his eye.

'Look here, old chap, if you don't mind me asking, where have you popped up from?' he inquired.

'I haven't popped up from anywhere. This happens to be my property,' was the crisp answer.

'Really? That's interesting. What's your name?'

'Campbell.'

Bertie nearly dropped his eyeglass. 'Campbell! Not *Angus* Campbell?'

'That's me.'

'Well, blow me down! That certainly is a corker. I don't know if you know it, but you're supposed to be dead.'

'Do I look dead?'

'No, but if you'll pardon me for saying so, you look as if you've been having a jolly good try.'

Campbell looked at Bertie as if he didn't quite know what to make of him. Perhaps it was understandable. He may have expected to see a man who looked like a police officer. 'We're wasting time,' he said impatiently. 'I've had a long talk with Ginger down on the plain. He's told me what you're doing here.'

'Jolly good. What's he doing now?'

'Gone to see what's happening in the cabin. He's coming back. You are Bertie, aren't you?' Campbell guessed, as if in some doubt.

'Absolutely. As large as life.'

'Ginger said you'd gone to look for Raulstein's launch.'

'That's right.'

'Did you find it?'

'Too true I did.'

'You went to rustle some food. Did you get any?'

'Yes sir, yes sir, a big bag full.'

'Where is it?' Campbell looked about.

'Where the rats can't get at it.'

'Can't you talk sense? What about that big buck Negro?'

'What about him?'

'How did you manage him?'

'Oh, he didn't make any trouble.'

‘Where are the rest of the gang?’

‘As far as I know they’re somewhere in front of me. Just where they’ve gone I couldn’t say. I saw them go past a little while ago. They seemed peeved about something.’

‘Where are you going now?’

‘To the cabin, of course. Where else? What’s the idea of that cudgel you’re carrying?’

‘I’m going to knock Raulstein’s block off if I can get close enough to him.’

‘Capital idea. I’m with you. But be careful. He carries a gun.’

‘I know.’

‘What are you going to do now?’

‘Ginger’s gone to the cabin to see how the land lies. He told me to wait here for him. I’d better do that. If I move I might miss him.’

At this juncture Ginger himself appeared. He arrived in a hurry. ‘So there you are,’ he said on seeing Bertie. ‘I see you two have met. We can talk about that later. We’ve got to get cracking.’

‘What’s the tizzy?’

‘There’s a row going on in the cabin. The whole gang seems to be there. Biggles is on his own with them. As far as I can make out, from what I could hear, someone has scuttled Raulstein’s launch.’ Ginger looked at Bertie suspiciously. ‘Do you know anything about it?’

‘I set fire to it, if that’s what you mean.’

‘What the dickens for? Now they’re stuck here with us.’

‘That was the idea. No use letting ‘em ran away with the boodle should they get their hands on it before we do.’

‘But you said you were going to grab some grub.’

‘I did. The fireworks were an afterthought. Always seize the initiative is Biggles’ motto. That’s what I’ve done — I hope.’

‘What about Raulstein?’

‘Apparently he discovered what had happened. I saw him and his pals come rushing along here a little while ago. They looked upset about something.’

‘No wonder. Now they’ve stormed the cabin. What’s happened to Tommy?’

‘I don’t know. He’s still with them — or he was. Neither he nor the black lad was with them when they came back, so they must have been left somewhere.’

‘What are we going to do? I mean, do we go to look for Tommy, or make for the cabin to support Biggles? While we’re talking he may be murdered. That goes for Tommy, too.’ Ginger spoke urgently, agitated.

Bertie polished his eyeglass vigorously. ‘But look here, dear boy, we can’t deal with both problems at once. I vote for the cabin, to have a crack at the situation there. Tommy will have to wait; that’s all there is to it.’

‘Need we all go to the cabin? Why shouldn’t I go to look for Tommy?’

‘Because all you’d do in the dark would be to break your neck. It’s a very devil of a rough coast. I know. I’ve seen it in daylight.’

Campbell stepped in. ‘Quit arguing, you guys. Have both of you got guns?’

‘Yes,’ answered Ginger, speaking for both.

‘Lend me one.’

Bertie frowned. ‘What are you going to do with it?’

‘I’ll show you,’ returned Campbell, with an edge on his voice.

‘Now hold hard,’ Bertie said. ‘We don’t go about shooting people.’

‘I don’t care what you do, but here we have our own way of dealing with gun-totin’ thugs. Just leave this to me. Raulstein has twice tried to bump me off. I’ll show you how to handle him.’

How this argument would have ended is a matter for speculation, but it was brought to an abrupt conclusion by Ginger raising a warning hand. ‘Listen! Someone’s coming.’

The sound approached quickly; a noise of running, stumbling footsteps, with heavy breathing. It came from the direction by which Bertie had arrived at the spot. They waited, tense, staring into the gathering gloom. Ginger took out his gun, prepared for trouble.

Presently the runner appeared. It was Tommy. He saw them and gasped a cry of relief. ‘Watch out, he’s after me,’ he panted as he ran up.

‘Who?’

‘One of Raulstein’s men. The black.’

There was no time for more, for the Negro now appeared, cursing as he ran. He slowed to a halt when he saw the party waiting in his path.

‘Are you looking for something?’ inquired Bertie coldly.

‘Yes — er no, boss.’

‘Good. Then you trot along back the way you came and save yourself a lot of trouble.’

‘My boss’ll slaughter me if I —’

‘I’ll slaughter you if you don’t do as I tell you. Get weaving, back the way you came — and don’t stop.’

For a few seconds the Negro hesitated, regarding the opposition and apparently considering the situation. Then, muttering something inaudible, he must have decided that discretion was more sensible than valour, for he turned and strode off in the direction from which he had come.

‘That’s one problem settled,’ Ginger said. He looked at Tommy. ‘What happened?’

‘I was left in the hands of that black tough. He was going to tie me to a tree, but I bolted. Who’s this?’ Tommy was staring at Campbell.

‘He’s the owner of the island. You should know him. Maybe he’s changed a bit since you last saw him. But don’t start asking questions. We’ve work to do. Biggles is alone in the cabin with the gang.’

‘They reckoned to spend the night there,’ Tommy said. ‘I heard them say so when they discovered their launch had gone on fire. Did you know about

that?’

‘Bertie did it. But that’s enough. Let’s get along to the cabin.’

‘Will one of you lend me a gun?’ Campbell said. ‘I’ll handle this.’

‘Why you?’ asked Ginger.

‘Because this land happens to be my property, that’s why. That makes you trespassers.’

‘I like that!’ protested Ginger indignantly.

‘Whether you like it or not, I claim the right to protect what belongs to me.’

‘Okay, if that’s how you want it.’ Ginger handed over his gun.

‘Thanks. I’ll see you get it back.’ Campbell set off towards the cabin.

‘Hold hard, you wild Scotsman,’ Bertie said. ‘What about the grub I won? We shall need it. I’ll fetch it. I won’t keep you a minute.’ He hurried off

The others waited Bertie reappeared with his sack. He handed it to Tommy. ‘Here, my lucky lad; you can carry this.’ Then, to Campbell: ‘Lead on, Macduff.’

‘What are we going to do?’ asked Ginger. ‘Don’t you think we ought to have some sort of plan? We can’t just barge in—’

‘Leave it to me’ Campbell said shortly. ‘We’ll take their guns off ‘em for a start. Just follow me and do as I say. I’ve done this before.’

‘Don’t for goodness’ sake shoot Biggles by mistake,’ pleaded Ginger anxiously.

‘There shouldn’t be any shooting. That’s enough chatter.’ Campbell walked on.

Ginger looked at Bertie and shrugged. Not sharing Campbell’s confidence, he could smell trouble ahead.

Nearing the cabin the party moved more slowly, picking a way through the empty cans. At the door Campbell stopped and raised a hand. From inside came a sound of voices raised in heated altercation. Very slowly Campbell raised the wooden latch. He opened the door an inch. Then he moved fast. In one movement he flung the door wide open. In a single stride he was inside. ‘Drop those guns,’ he rapped out.

Every back, except Biggles’, was towards the door. Nobody moved.

‘I said drop ‘em,’ snapped Campbell. ‘Two seconds and I’m shooting.’

Raulstein snatched a glance over his shoulder, and, of course, saw who was there. His gun rattled on the floor.

‘Last time,’ Campbell rasped. ‘Drop ‘em.’

Two more guns thudded on the floor.

‘Pick ‘em up, Bertie,’ Campbell ordered.

Bertie stepped inside, and having kicked the guns to one side picked them up. He handed two to Ginger who had followed him in.

Raulstein looked at Campbell. ‘So it’s you.’

‘Yes, you murdering swine, it’s me,’ Campbell said through his teeth.

‘Make one wrong move, just one, and that’ll be all the excuse I need to fill

your dirty hide with lead.'

Biggles, who had not moved, spoke. 'Glad to see you, chaps. I was wondering how long it would be before you showed up. Who's the new boy?'

Ginger answered. 'Angus Campbell.'

Biggles' eyebrows did go up at this information. 'Glad to meet you, Angus. Nice to see you still on your feet.'

'Do you want to keep these rats here?' inquired Angus.

'No. The atmosphere will smell sweeter without them.'

Angus faced the three crooks. 'Get out,' he snapped.

'But you can't turn us out on a night like this,' protested one of the Americans. 'One of you burnt our boat. Where are we going to sleep?'

'You're lucky I'm giving you a chance to sleep anywhere. Move before I change my mind. My finger's twitching.'

'What are we going to eat?' asked Raulstein. 'We've no food.'

'Try eating each other. You've helped yourself to the food I left here, now find your own. If you all starve to death it'll help to feed my foxes. Thanks to you, they're hungry too.'

The three men exchanged glances. Raulstein looked at Tommy appealingly, but he found no mercy in his eyes. They filed slowly from the room.

'Shut the door behind you,' requested Biggles.

The door slammed.

Biggles looked around and smiled. 'Great work,' he said.

CHAPTER 15

INTERLUDE FOR REFLECTION

‘AND now what?’ inquired Bertie, looking at Biggles, after the sounds of the crooks’ departure had died away in a rattle of empty cans.

‘What do you mean?’

‘What do we do next?’

‘Nothing. What can we do in the dark except make ourselves comfortable for the night? It seems to me we have something to talk about. Or rather, you have. While you chaps have been gallivanting around, all I’ve done is sit here. I can only guess at what you’ve been up to, but it looks as if you’ve been busy. Tell me about it. Where you found Angus. But before you start, the pressing question is, did you get those rations you went to collect?’

‘Absolutely, old boy.’

‘Where are they?’

‘Here, in the bag. Bring me that bag, Tommy.’

‘Better and better,’ congratulated Biggles. ‘Let’s have a look at what you’ve got. I shan’t be particular. Anything to fill the cavity inside me. Did you get ‘em from the launch?’

‘Yes. No trouble at all.’

Ginger spoke on a note of urgency. ‘Just a minute. What about the gang? If they get desperate they’re likely to come back.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Biggles. ‘I know that sort. They’re helpless without guns.’

‘I was thinking they might try to rush us.’

‘Let ‘em try,’ put in Angus. ‘But I’ll see they don’t do that. There’s a wooden bar that fits into slots across the inside of the door. I fixed it to prevent the door blowing open in a gale.’ He fetched the bar and put it into position. He went on: ‘If those crooks have any sense they’ll shelter in the woods, where it’s always degrees warmer than in the open. Not that I care what becomes of them, the murdering devils. Anyhow, it’ll be a fine day tomorrow.’

‘You think so?’

‘The signs are right. I live here. The fog will have cleared by morning.’

‘Good. If you’re right we shall be able to get on with our work.

Meanwhile, let’s have a look at what’s inside the feed bag. When we’ve shifted some of its contents we can talk about guards for the night. Someone will have to stay awake, just in case.’

Bertie unloaded his sack on the table. ‘Help yourselves, my lucky lads,’ he invited.

‘A pretty sight for a starving man,’ declared Biggles as everyone helped himself. He went on: ‘What I’m most anxious to know, Tommy, is this. Did those crooks get the swag bag?’

‘No. That is, not as far as I know. They didn’t find it while I was with them.’

‘Do they know where it is?’

‘They have a rough idea. I showed them the landslide and said the stuff must be buried somewhere underneath it. I’m not sure if they believed me. I’m sorry I had to tell ‘em anything, but with them threatening to bump me off if I didn’t talk, what else could I do?’

‘You couldn’t do anything else,’ Biggles agreed. ‘We’ll have a go at it in the morning. I’m afraid it’ll mean digging, so as we haven’t any tools, Fraser’s first job, when he comes, will be to fetch some from Rankinton.’

‘There should be some tools lying about somewhere,’ informed Bertie. ‘A crow-bar and a spade. At my suggestion a coloured deck-hand — cook, he called himself — took them along to the gang. He hadn’t got ‘em when he came back, so they must have been dumped.’ He had to explain about the Negro, of whom, of course, Biggles knew nothing.

‘The tools were left lying on the landslide,’ Tommy said. ‘I was there when they arrived. When that black type rolled up and said someone had sent him from the launch, I thought the gang would kill him. They realized that one of you must have found the boat and there was a rush to get back to it.’

‘I had to get rid of the fellow somehow, when I found him on board,’ Bertie said. ‘After he’d gone, and I’d collected a few odds and ends, I spilt a little paraffin on the floor and dropped a match on it. Sort of last-minute brainwave, if you see what I mean. It struck me it would be a good thing to cut off their retreat in case they beat us to the jackpot.’

‘I was with them,’ Tommy said. ‘You should have heard the cursing when they saw the launch on fire. But there was nothing they could do about it. The fire was sending up a cloud of smoke that must have been seen from the mainland had there been no fog. Which reminds me; I fancy the smoke was seen by a ship.’

‘A ship?’ queried Biggles quickly. ‘What sort of ship?’

‘I don’t know. I’m not a sailor. A fishing boat, I suppose. The sails were down, I imagine because there was no wind; but it had an engine of some sort. I could hear it. When I spotted the boat in the mist it seemed to be coming towards the island. I hoped it would. With the gang threatening to bump me off to get rid of me, now they realized I was no more use to them, I hoped it would arrive in time to rescue me. The fog was clearing a bit out to sea, so if we could see the boat, the crew must have seen the smoke. The gang saw the boat, of course. They started arguing about it, what it was likely to do, and so on. Maybe that was why they didn’t shoot me.’

‘What did the gang do with you?’

‘They left me in charge of the darkie and dashed off to catch the man who had set their launch on fire. They were so mad I don’t think they knew what they were doing. It was soon after they’d gone that I bolted into the wood with the Negro after me.’

‘I saw the gang coming back,’ put in Bertie. ‘If they hadn’t made so much noise they might have caught me.’

‘Does anyone know if this boat actually came to the island?’ asked Biggles.

No one knew. ‘Does it matter?’ inquired Bertie.

‘It might matter a lot,’ Biggles answered seriously. ‘When the crew discovered what had happened, that the smoke was coming from a vessel on fire, they’d report it on the mainland, if that’s where they were making for when they saw the smoke. They might have sent a message by radio, if they had the equipment. The skipper might even have come ashore to see what was going on. I wonder what sort of tale the gang would tell him if he bumped into them. Was the launch really gutted?’

‘I couldn’t say for certain because I didn’t see the end of it,’ Tommy admitted. ‘But I think it must have been. It was burnt down to the water line, so anything left would sink.’

This conversation had been carried on while everyone was busy on an overdue meal. ‘We’ll put what’s left in the cupboard; we may still need it,’ Biggles said.

While this was being done Bertie went to the door and looked out. ‘There’s still a little fog hanging about,’ he reported. ‘But Angus looks like being right. I can see stars.’

‘Any sign of the gang?’ asked Biggles.

‘Couldn’t hear a sound. Without guns it’s hard to see what they can do.’

‘All the same, they’re a crafty, calculating lot, so don’t let’s get careless and take chances. If the weather does clear we can expect Jack Fraser over first thing in the morning. That means we’d better be on the move at the crack of dawn. Someone will have to go to the landing ground to meet the machine and put Jack wise as to what’s been going on here. There’s a chance that the fishing boat Tommy saw went on to Rankinton, so if the crew talked Jack would suspect that things here were not all they should be.’

The discussion continued. Bertie, Ginger and Tommy, all related their parts in the events of the afternoon, filling in the gaps, so to speak; so by the time the stories had been told, Biggles was up to date with the situation as it now stood.

‘As there’s nothing more we can do tonight, we might as well see about getting some sleep while we have the chance,’ he decided. ‘Someone will have to keep awake in case of accidents,’ he continued. ‘I wouldn’t put anything past those rats outside. They might even try to set fire to the cabin just for the mischief of it, so whoever’s on guard had better keep his ears open. You’ve all been out, so you must be tired. I’ll take the first four hours. The rest of you can arrange turns among yourselves. With any luck, by this time tomorrow we should be sleeping on the mainland — in beds. Speaking for myself, I shan’t be sorry to see the last of this dreary place. It might be all right for foxes; but as far as I’m concerned Angus is welcome to it. Whoever

is on duty, see that I'm on my feet by half past four.'

In a few minutes everyone had settled down for the night, except Biggles, who remained in the chair he had occupied for so long, his pistol ready to hand on the plain wooden table beside him.

CHAPTER 16

A DESPERATE REMEDY

BIGGLES was asleep when it happened.

Angus was on guard duty, although the others were beginning to stir. Seeing the time was nearly four-thirty he went to the door to inspect the weather, and, as he said, to let in a little fresh air, the one small window having been left closed to keep out the fog. He removed the wooden bar and stepped out, looking up at the sky. He took only one pace, but no man ever came nearer to collision with death.

A fire-arm crashed. A bullet ripped a splinter from the door-post and went on across the room to bury itself with a vicious thud in the wall on the far side. Its line afterwards showed that although Angus had obviously been the target, it must have missed Biggles by inches.

Biggles sprang straight from sleep to swift movement. 'What the—?'

Angus had already jumped back inside the room and slammed the door.

'Who did that?' demanded Biggles angrily, looking round the startled faces, obviously under the impression that someone in the room had accidentally fired his gun. Indeed, his next remark confirmed this. 'Why aren't you more careful? Someone might have been killed.'

'The shot was fired by someone outside,' explained Angus. 'I opened the door.'

The others were still standing rigid, silenced by shock.

'So they've still got a gun,' Biggles said grimly. 'But just a minute. I know I was asleep, but I can still hear that report. It didn't sound to me like a pistol shot. I'd swear it was a rifle.'

Bertie spoke. 'Whatever it was it knocks our ideas for this morning sideways. Anyone who opens that door will be asking for it.'

'Apart from trying to kill Angus, they obviously intend to keep us cooped up in here,' Ginger said. 'They want us out of the way, to leave them free to carry on with the search for the bag of gold and diamonds.'

'But we can't stay here all day,' protested Angus. 'What about Jack Fraser when he comes over?'

'All right. Take it easy. There's no need to get in a flap,' Biggles said shortly. 'This calls for some hard thinking. Where did the rifle come from? Had one of them carried one, we couldn't have failed to see it.'

'There might have been one on the launch,' suggested Ginger.

'In which case it would now be at the bottom of the deep blue sea,' answered Bertie. 'The darkie I sent ashore hadn't got one.'

'But if they hadn't got a rifle when they came here, how could they have got one since?' argued Ginger.

'I wouldn't know, and I shan't try to guess,' Biggles stated. 'All that

matters is, they've got one; and that being so is going to make things difficult — very difficult.'

'But by keeping us penned up here, where will that get them?' Bertie wanted to know.

'It would enable them to get on with the treasure hunt unmolested.'

'But they can't do both, go treasure hunting and at the same time cover our door.'

'One man would be enough to cover the door,' Biggles answered. 'The others could work on the landslide.'

'That's about it,' agreed Angus. 'If there's only one man outside we should be able to deal with him.'

'How?' inquired Biggles, cynically. 'Try opening that door and the sharp-shooter outside will see you and pull the trigger before you see him.'

'It's a fine day. I'm not spending it sitting here,' declared Angus.

'Let's use our heads before we do anything else in a hurry,' requested Biggles. 'Getting shot isn't going to help anyone. That gun-slinger outside, whoever he is, means business. He's already demonstrated that.' He thought for a minute, staring at the door. Then he got up, walked over to it, examined the chipped door-post and took a line from it to where the bullet had embedded itself in the opposite wall. He went on, speaking particularly to Angus. 'Did you have time to form an opinion of the actual spot from which the bullet was fired? Did you, for instance, see the flash?'

'No. All I can say is, it was pretty close. Not more than eight or ten yards, I'd say.'

'Is my memory at fault, or am I right in thinking that extending the line of the bullet beyond the door, at the distance you reckon there's a clump of dwarf birch?'

'That's right. I often thought of clearing it to open up the view, but I never got around to it.'

'Then that's probably where our trigger-happy gun merchant has tucked himself. You'll remember that when Raulstein came here, he said he was posting a man to shoot anyone who tried to leave the cabin, although, as we know, he didn't do that. That clump of birch may have been the cover he had in mind. This time he's done it.'

'What about it, old boy?' inquired Bertie. 'How do we shift him? Anyone opening the door is liable to meet a lump of lead coming the other way.'

Biggles agreed. 'I have no intention of putting the matter to test. That is, I wouldn't open the door and step out as if I was going for a stroll. That would be stupid. But that clump of birch isn't very large, and I doubt if anyone in it would stay there if bullets started whistling through it. It won't be Raulstein; we can bet on that. He'll be all agog to get his hands on the swag bag. I can't see him leaving that to his pals. Not likely.'

'You've got something in mind,' guessed Ginger.

'I'm thinking it should be possible to get the door open without anyone

exposing himself. If that could be done, we, from the inside, keeping out of the line of fire, could make things dashed uncomfortable for anyone squatting in the bushes.'

'I see what you mean,' Angus said. 'I don't mind opening the door.'

'You've done it once.'

'Yes, but then I didn't know what was outside. Now I do I'd be a little more careful. I reckon I could throw that door wide open and get clear before anyone waiting could raise a gun.'

'Feel like having a go?'

'Sure.'

'If you could do that, we from inside here could plaster the bushes with such a fusillade that anyone there wouldn't be able to get out of 'em fast enough. It wouldn't be necessary to see him.' Biggles glanced at the window, now grey with the approach of another day. 'We shall soon have to try something, or Fraser will be here before we can warn him of what's going on.'

'Okay,' Angus said. 'Let's have a bash at it. You get in position and I'll open the door.'

'This is a dangerous game and I must say I don't care much for it,' replied Biggles dubiously. 'We shall have to be mighty careful or we're liable to shoot each other. However, let's have a go.'

Guns in hand, they took up positions clear of the line of fire from the suspected location of the marksman outside. Bertie stood hard against the door-post so that only his right arm and shoulder would be exposed when the door was opened. Ginger took up a similar position, crouching low. Biggles lay on the floor.

'Okay, Angus,' he said. 'Go ahead. Jump well clear when you shove the door open so that we don't hit you. Don't you attempt to do any shooting. Leave that to us. All you have to do is leave us a clear view.'

'Here we go, then,' returned Angus, advancing to the door and putting out a hand to the latch. Very quietly he raised it and then stood posed to jump clear. 'Right?' he asked.

'Right.'

In a single movement Angus flung the door open and sprang aside. The instant the door was open wide enough the guns inside the cabin were pouring salvos, blind, into the bushes. The noise in the confined space was deafening. Cordite smoke reeked. Mingling with all this, from outside came a loud cry and a crashing of twigs.

'Hold it,' yelled Biggles, and pistol raised he rushed out. He did not shoot. 'There he goes,' he cried, pointing.

The others joined him.

'So *that's* who it was, the poor silly ass,' observed Bertie.

Running and jumping over obstacles was the Negro cook.

'Okay, let him go,' ordered Biggles, beating the bushes to make sure there

was no one else there. 'He's only a tool of those supposed-to-be civilized rats. Raulstein will probably give him hell for leaving his post.' He came out of the bushes holding up a rifle. 'I wonder where they got this?'

'Looks like an obsolete cavalry carbine,' Bertie said.

'That's what it is,' confirmed Biggles. 'Magazine holds five shots,' he went on, jerking out a spent cartridge, which, of course, put another in the breech. 'Here, you might find this useful for killing vermin,' he concluded, handing the weapon to Angus.

The conversation ended when from a distance, but approaching, came the unmistakable clatter of a helicopter.

'I'll get to the landing ground,' Ginger said tersely, and started off.

'Wait!' ordered Biggles. 'It sounds as if it might be coming on to the cabin.'

They watched, ignoring the fleeing Negro, who was soon out of sight. The 'chopper' swung into view above the treetops. It hovered, losing height. The pilot must have spotted them, for a streamer of rag, actually a handkerchief, came fluttering down from the cockpit. It hit the ground not far away. Ginger ran and picked it up. He came back disengaging a piece of paper that had been folded in it. 'Looks like a message,' he said, handing it to Biggles, who read aloud what had been written on the paper.

'Watch out. Raulstein and his friends have guns. Am landing same place.'

Biggles frowned. 'What does he mean by that? He says guns, in the plural. No doubt he wrote this in a hurry, but it's a pity he couldn't have been a little less vague. Does he mean *fresh* guns? No, he couldn't mean that. How did he know Raulstein was here at all? He didn't know that when we landed. Even if he knew he'd expect them to have guns. I don't get it.'

'What about the rifle?' reminded Bertie. 'They certainly didn't have one when we first bumped into them, or we'd have seen it. How do you work that out?'

'I think there's only one answer to this,' Biggles said thoughtfully. 'That fishing boat must have put in here. One of the crew had a rifle and Raulstein bought it.'

'But wait a minute, old boy,' protested Bertie. 'Such boats don't carry rifles. They catch fish with nets or lines; they don't shoot 'em.'

'I'm well aware of that. But let me finish. The boat went on to Rankinton. The crew talked about men on Marten Island and Fraser got to hear of it. Can you think of any other explanation?'

'Frankly, no,' admitted Bertie.

'I can see one other possibility,' put in Ginger, who stood listening. 'The fishing boat might have picked up the gang and taken them to Rankinton, where they collected some fresh guns.'

'In that case how did they get back here? They're certainly here now.'

'I don't know.'

'Never mind. That's enough guessing. No doubt we shall learn the answers

from Fraser. You dash along and meet him.'

'Where shall I find you?'

'I'm going along to the landslide to see what's going on there. The Negro went in that direction, so that's where they'll be.'

'Shall I bring Fraser back with me?'

'That'll be for him to decide. Tell him the position.'

'Okay.' Ginger went off, running.

'Come on,' Biggles said to the others. 'I'm not letting those crooks get away with the swag.' He set the pace. There was no more talking. They hadn't far to go.

Angus's weather forecast was proving correct. The sun was climbing out of the sea into a cloudless sky, to banish the last traces of fog, which here and there clung like tattered muslin to the tallest trees.

CHAPTER 17

THE END OF THE TRAIL

BIGGLES took the nearest way to the scene of the landslide. This was along the top of the cliff. It also happened to be the easiest way, being open, the sullen trees that covered so much of the island having been unable to keep a foothold in the devastating winter gales.

They had covered about half the distance to the objective when he came to an abrupt halt. He pointed down to where the sea lapped the foot of the little promontory which had already played a part in the sinister events on the island. Moored close in, just off a scrap of rocky beach on which a dinghy had been drawn up, was a ship, a small, dark-painted vessel with two masts. It looked like one of the local fishing boats.

‘How about that?’ asked Biggles tersely.

‘It answers our questions,’ Bertie said.

‘Yes, but not all of them,’ returned Biggles. ‘I can’t see anyone on board. Does that mean the crew have been crazy enough to join Raulstein in this lunatic treasure hunt? I don’t believe it. There’s something fishy about this, in more senses than one. But let’s not waste time guessing. We should soon know the meaning of this.’ He hurried on.

Another hundred yards, rounding a small escarpment of rock, brought the landslide into view. Even before they saw it, a yell of triumph and a babble of voices gave reason to suppose that something exciting had happened.

Rounding the escarpment Biggles stopped. They all stopped. This is what they saw. Conspicuous on the rubbish of the landslide stood Raulstein, resting on a shovel, holding aloft a canvas bag.

‘That’s it,’ groaned Tommy. ‘They’ve found it.’

No one answered. All watched. Standing close to Raulstein were the two Americans. There was another person close, if not actually in the central picture. It was the Negro. For some reason not apparent he had stopped short of the party on the landslide. It may have been that he was reluctant to go nearer for fear of what Raulstein would say about him leaving his post at the cabin. If this was the cause of his hesitation he had good reason to be afraid, as events were soon to reveal.

Things moved swiftly, and as far as the watchers were concerned, unexpectedly, to a dramatic climax. A final one for the unfortunate black.

Suddenly Raulstein saw him standing there. He shouted something. What he said could not be heard, but as the Negro now walked on it was presumably an order to come closer, perhaps to explain his behaviour; why he had left the cabin. Whatever the reason the Negro did not stop, although his advance became more and more hesitant, until he stood in front of Raulstein. It seemed from his actions that he was trying to explain something, such as why he had

run away. What he actually said will never be known. It threw Raulstein into a passion. His voice rose to a torrent of abuse. He appeared to lose control of himself. Then, even before the Americans could have suspected what he intended to do, he had snatched a gun from his pocket and fired it point-blank into the Negro's chest. The unfortunate man staggered back, collapsed and rolled a little way down the slope before being stopped by a boulder. He lay still.

'The dirty swine,' growled Angus, and dropping on his knees took aim with the captured carbine. 'Hold it,' snapped Biggles. 'What are you going to do?'

'Shoot that murdering blackguard.'

'Don't do it,' ordered Biggles. 'You're not a public executioner. We'll see he gets what he deserves.'

In the event, this time he was wrong. A furious argument had now broken out between the three men on the hill. What it was about could not be heard, but in view of what followed it would be reasonable to suppose that the Americans were protesting at the shooting of the Negro. After all, he was their employee. Of course, there may have been another reason behind the next move. The loot was there. Why share it between three?

Anyway, whatever the reason, still with the gun in his hand, Raulstein turned face to face with the American who wore the peaked cap. He may, or may not, have intended to use the gun; possibly only as a threat. He was not given the chance. In a flash the American had whipped a gun from his pocket and shot Raulstein, who dropped the bag he was holding, and falling, rolled down the slope in the wake of the man he had just killed.

'Oh charming,' murmured Bertie. 'If they go on at this rate they'll finish the job for us.'

'They've got fresh guns from somewhere,' Biggles said. 'We shall have to watch how we go. They'll fight rather than give up those jewels.'

'Well, that's all right with me, old boy, if that's how they want it.'

'I'm thinking of that boat. If they can get to it we'll lose them, and the jewels.'

'I could pick them off from here,' offered Angus helpfully, tapping the carbine.

'I'm tempted to accept your offer, but as a policeman, unfortunately, I can't take the law into my own hands.'

At this stage of the proceedings the inevitable happened. They were seen by one of the Americans. He touched the other on the arm and pointed. Had the men not been so taken up with their own affairs the spectators must have been seen earlier.

'This is where we step in,' Biggles said, and took a pace forward.

A voice shouted: 'That's close enough. Stop there and you won't get hurt.'

Biggles walked on, Angus beside him, Bertie and Tommy close.

'You heard me,' shouted the voice. The speaker picked up the canvas bag

which Raulstein had dropped.

'Throw down your guns,' ordered Biggles.

The order was ignored. Biggles did not expect it to be obeyed. The two men, guns in hand, their eyes on Biggles' party, began to move sideways down the hill towards the sea.

'They're making for the boat,' surmised Biggles. 'We've got to stop them. If once they get to sea they may get clear away.' He too began moving towards the sea to cut them off.

One of the men fired a shot. But the range was too wide for effective pistol shooting and the bullet smacked into a rock.

'Better let me stop 'em before one of us gets hurt,' urged Angus.

Biggles hesitated. It seemed the most sensible thing to do, but he still did not feel justified in going to extremes.

'As far as we know they haven't broken the law,' he pointed out.

'Rot. One of 'em shot Raulstein. Isn't murder breaking the law?'

'He could plead self-defence. It could be true. Don't forget Raulstein had shot their man.' Raising his voice, he again called to the two men, still moving steadily, if cautiously, towards the edge of the cliff. 'Pack it in. You can't get away.'

The answer was two quick shots. Then the men broke into a run, obviously intending to shoot their way to the boat.

'To heck with this,' growled Angus. 'I'm not standing for being shot at. I'll stop 'em.'

Biggles might have agreed, but a fresh development now occurred to put a different complexion on the situation. The fugitives stopped. The reason was not hard to find. Coming from the opposite direction appeared three men, hurrying as if they had heard the shooting. One, easily recognized by his uniform, was Jack Fraser, the Mountie. He carried a rifle. With him was Ginger and another man, a stranger, dressed in dark blue trousers and guernsey, fisherman style. This trio also stopped.

Fraser called. 'Throw down your guns. Any more shooting and I shall open up. And I'm not kidding.'

While the two Americans held a brief conversation Biggles said: 'That's better. They'll have more sense than to fight it out against rifles, with odds of three to one against them.'

Apparently the two men thought so, for they dropped their guns, and the jewel bag, and raised their hands in submission.

Fraser advanced. Biggles' party did the same. All arrived together.

One of the Americans said: 'What's the big idea? You ain't got nothing against us. We're United States citizens, so you'd best be careful.'

Fraser answered: 'I'm taking you to Rankinton where maybe you'll be able to explain why you stole this man's boat.'

'We only borrowed it for the day. We were taking it back,' protested one of the Americans.

‘Anyhow it wasn’t us who took it, it was Raulstein,’ said the other.

‘You were with him. That makes you party to the theft.’ Fraser looked around. ‘Where is Raulstein? We’ll hear what he has to say about it.’

‘I don’t think you will,’ put in Biggles. ‘He’s dead.’

‘How come?’

Biggles pointed to one of the Americans. ‘This man shot him. I saw him. There are two other witnesses.’

‘What else could I do?’ countered the American. ‘You must have seen what happened. He was going to shoot me. As it was he’d already shot my cook.’

Fraser looked at Biggles. ‘Is this true?’

‘More or less. Could be. I couldn’t hear what was said. I only saw the shootings. The two bodies are over there on the hill. It’s time someone had a look at them. They may not be dead.’

‘We’ll see,’ Fraser said. ‘Pick up those guns, Ginger. What’s in that bag?’

Biggles answered. ‘The jewels.’

‘Bring that along, too.’

With the presence of the sailor now explained, the entire party moved along to the scene of the shooting. Fraser knelt to examine the bodies. It did not take long. ‘They’re dead,’ he announced, getting up. ‘We’ll deal with them later. The first thing is to get back to Rankinton.’ He looked at the Americans. ‘You’re under arrest. Don’t talk now. When we get across to the mainland you can make a statement if you feel like it. Don’t try to get away. You haven’t a hope. Here on this island you’d starve to death.’

‘How are you going to take them across?’ inquired Biggles.

‘In the boat. I shall go with them, with the owner. You can come with us if you like, unless you’d rather take my machine home. Can you fly a helicopter?’

Biggles smiled. ‘I think so. I’ve done it before.’

‘Okay. Then you do that. I’ll see you at the airfield. You can take Angus with you. Ginger has told me about him. You might as well take the jewels with you. Everyone else will come with me.’

‘Fair enough,’ agreed Biggles.

‘You needn’t worry about us,’ said the American who wore the yachting cap. ‘We shan’t give no trouble. We can explain everything. I shall have a few questions to ask. Why someone set fire to my launch? It set me back five thousand bucks.’

‘We can talk about that later,’ Fraser said curtly. ‘When we get to the mainland we’ll get everything sorted out.’

Nothing more was said. Biggles picked up the jewel bag and the party broke up, Biggles and Angus making for the helicopter, the rest going on to the boat.

As they passed the cabin Biggles asked Angus: ‘Anything here you want?’

‘Nothing. As I feel now I never want to see the place again. I’ll decide later

what to do about my foxes.'

That was all. They went on to the helicopter and a quarter of an hour later Biggles was parking it in its usual place on the landing strip. And this, broadly speaking, was the end of what had turned out to be an ugly affair.

Later, in the Blue Dolphin, with the prisoners under lock and key pending transfer to Newfoundland, notes were compared and some unexplained details sorted out.

What apparently had happened after Bertie had set fire to the launch was this. The fire, as had been surmised, had been seen by the fishing boat returning to harbour at Rankinton. It had picked up Raulstein and his companions who, it turned out, had been associated with him when he had once operated in America. Their explanation of the fire was that it had been an accident. (They could hardly tell the truth without awkward questions being asked.) They were landed at Rankinton where they had booked rooms for the night at the Blue Dolphin, presumably without any intention of using them — unless they had changed their minds afterwards.

At all events, having had a meal, their next step was to go to the local gunsmith where they had bought three second-hand revolvers and an old cavalry carbine, which makes it evident that they had every intention of returning to Marten Island. Not being in a position to buy a boat, they had the audacity to steal the very boat that had rescued them, no doubt planning to sail away in it when they had finished at the island.

Unfortunately for them the theft was seen by a boy night fishing from the wharf. He ran off and told the owner, who told Fraser what had happened. Thus the Mountie learned that Raulstein was back and had been on the island, although of course he didn't know what had happened there. Inquiries revealed that Raulstein and Co. had provided themselves with weapons. Fraser could guess why. The boat had been taken for a return trip to the island in the hope of getting the jewels. That was as much as Fraser, who had been grounded all day by fog, needed to know. As soon as visibility made it possible, having scribbled a warning note to Biggles, he had taken off, taking the owner of the boat with him to identify his property. Before landing he had dropped the note by the cabin as already recorded. He could not say more because he knew no more. He was simply concerned to let Biggles know that armed crooks were on the island. Biggles of course knew all about that, but he was not to know how the crooks had got fresh guns.

What followed needs little explanation. Fraser had landed. Ginger had met him, and as they hurried to the cabin put him in possession of all the facts up to date. Hearing shots, they had gone on in the direction from which they were coming, with what result we know.

There was a delay of a few days before Biggles was able to start for home. He had to go to Police Headquarters in Newfoundland and there make a sworn statement of evidence of all that had happened on Marten Island, to which the others bore witness. As the authorities already knew his purpose in

visiting the island, there was no difficulty about this. Eventually he was able to get away, taking the jewels — still in the canvas bag — with him, and made the return trip across the Atlantic without further incident.

What happened to Tommy? He had to stand trial, of course, for his part in the robbery, but in view of his subsequent behaviour the judge took a sympathetic view and he was discharged with nothing worse than 'Bound Over'. The fact that the police did not press their case may have had something to do with it.

The jewels were returned to the shop from which they had been stolen. As a police officer Biggles could not claim the reward that had been offered for their recovery; and Tommy, of course, was not in a position to do so.

Biggles was content with the congratulations of his Chief and Tommy went home to a happy family.

What happened to the two Americans, left in custody in Newfoundland, Biggles never knew. He never troubled to find out. He merely remarked to the others that he hoped they had seen the last of Labrador. What they had seen was enough, and best forgotten.

Bertie agreed, observing that he hoped jewel thieves would in future hide their swag in more agreeable climates. 'Give me islands where if you feel like a snack you can nibble a brace of pineapples or sharpen your teeth on a jolly old coconut — all that sort of thing, if you get my meaning.'

Eyes twinkling, Biggles nodded. 'I see exactly what you mean. I must try to arrange it.'

With Jack Fraser and Angus Campbell, contact is renewed once a year by an exchange of Christmas greeting cards.

THE END